Enjoying the Best

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Enjoying the Best

by Pragnificent (PragmaticHominid)

Summary

Next story in the AU series where Hannibal is a troubled FBI profiler and Will is a psychiatrist and serial killer.

Chapter 1

Two Months from Now

Hannibal is returning from the marketplace with the shopping when he spots the puppy nosing around the trashcans.

They are secure, those trashcans, and there's no possible way that the puppy will be able to open or knock them over. The streets and sidewalks in Minsk are cleaner than any he has ever seen, and there is precious little refuse to be had for small stray dogs.

When Hannibal approaches it shies away from him and retreats to the other side of the trashcans. Hannibal backs off, giving the puppy its space.

He perches on the edge of a nearby planter and reaches into one of the shopping bags. There's a paper package of pork sausages that Hannibal bought because he knows Will likes them, though he himself cannot eat such things, and these are what he sacrifices to his task, opening the package and tossing a bite-sized piece towards the puppy.

The puppy sniffs the air and then steps a bit closer to snap up the bit of sausage. It swallows without chewing, then looks up at Hannibal, intent but cautious, and Hannibal sees that there is a length of brown rope tangled around its neck. He's not sure how old the dog is, but he thinks that it is very young - certainly, considerably younger than Beth was when Will gave her to him. Its coat is brindle, patches of black and brown and gold, and when it turns its dark eyes up at Hannibal they strike him as intelligent. The puppy whines.

Hannibal decides that it will do, and he tosses another bite of sausage so it lands at the halfway point between himself and the puppy.

When it's close enough to pick up, Hannibal does just that, leaning forward and catching it by the scruff of the neck. It does not try to escape, but squirms only slightly when Hannibal transfers it to the crook of his arm so he can unfold one of the unused canvas shopping bags.

He deposits the puppy into the bag, picks up his shopping, and heads home.

Will is still in bed when Hannibal gets home, and that's good because it's exactly where he belongs, though Hannibal has had some difficulty convincing him on that point.

The encephalitis is back, and the sickly sweet smell of it is heavy into their bedroom, sweated through the sheets and into the mattress.

Pill bottles and other supplies stand in ordered ranks on the bedside table. An IV bag hangs from its poll, the line finding its terminus in the back of Will's hand, feeding directly into his veins a steady supply of the same drug cocktail that was used to treat him last time. Will recalled what he needed from memory and Hannibal had gotten it for him; he did, after all, spend enough time as a cop to know how one might obtain all sorts of illicit substances.

Will is feverish but lucid when Hannibal comes into the room, sitting up in bed with his tablet, and without comment Hannibal takes the puppy from the bag and deposits him in Will's lap.

He looks down at the rawboned little thing, which he supposes to be perhaps ten weeks old, though hunger might have delayed his natural growth. Will does not touch him. "I suppose this is *probably* a dog," he allows. "Though it's hard to be sure. Hannibal, why did you bring this filthy thing into the house?"

Hannibal doesn't answer. He waits.

"Well, I don't want it," Will goes on, and winces as a bolt of pain shoots across his already aching head. "It's a mutt, Hannibal, what can I possibly do with it? I can already see that it has fleas and worms and god knows what else."

The puppy totters towards the edge of the bed, and a small annoyed sound slips through Will's lips as he reaches out and catches him before he can tumble over the edge. He squirms in Will's grasp, and without seeming to be aware of what he is doing Will cradles the puppy against his chest and begins to pet him.

"And another thing," Will grouses. "It smells bad. I know you can tell how much it stinks, Hannibal. Smells like it's been rolling around in a damn ashtray, among less savory things."

And Hannibal, who is indeed perfectly aware of this, runs down the list of cigarette brands in his memory and says, "Name him 'Maverick,' then."

Will rolls his eyes. The puppy is trying to wiggle free of Will's hands to sniff his face, the slightly curled tail wagging eagerly, and Hannibal's sees the flash of a smile escape to Will's face before he masks it behind mildly annoyed disgust again.

Hannibal wonders why Will bothers with the act. He sighs and says, "Give it back to me."

Will is suddenly suspicious and possessive. "Why?" he asks, and Hannibal can see that he is worried that Hannibal might turn the puppy back outside.

"Why do you care, if you don't want it?" Hannibal asks, but the look that crosses Will's face troubles him. He'd expected this to be fun, an opportunity to tease Will for being secretly soft-hearted, but he looks on the verge of tears.

Hannibal relents at once. "I'm just going to give him a bath," he tells Will.

Will lets Hannibal take the puppy back then, but hesitantly. "Dilute some of dish soap and use that like shampoo," he says. "That'll kill a lot of the fleas, too."

He does as Will instructs, and feels a swell of vindictive pleasure when he sees the parasites washed away from the dog's coat and down the drain. The puppy's mottled fur is two shades brighter absent the layer of filth.

Hannibal watches his own hands and forearms as he goes about the work. He's still, he knows, underweight, but it isn't the dangerousness thinness that he'd suffered from two months earlier. This pleases him, and he flexes his hand for the sake of seeing the movement of flesh and solid muscle over the previously all-too-exposed bones.

When he finishes drying the puppy off and brings him back to Will, Hannibal sees that Will is still struggling to maintain emotional distance from the animal.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea,” Will says, though he takes the puppy and holds him when Hannibal passes him to him. “This isn’t my type of thing, Hannibal. I kept working dogs - purebreed animals that were meant to do a specific task. I’ve never had a housepet and I don’t think I want one.”

It’s obvious bullshit, coming from a man who insisted on making pets out of yard chickens. “We had Beth,” he reminds Will.

“That was different,” Will says quickly, but doesn’t elaborate.

Hannibal sits on the edge of the bed, down near Will’s legs. He puts a hand on Will’s knee, over the covers, and turns his head to look at him. “Are you worried that you’ll have to give him up, like you did your other dogs?”

Will winces. Then he nods.

“If things get hot it’s going to be hard enough to keep a low profile without a distinctive-looking mutt in tow, and if we need to run there’s no one here who can take him in for us, not like Margot did with Beth and the chickens.”

“That’s not going to happen this time.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“But I am,” Hannibal tells him, unflappable. “I gave him to you, and you’ll keep him, and I’ll see to that.”

Will worries his lower lip between his teeth. Then, voice so soft that Hannibal can barely make out the words, he says, “Thank you.”

Hannibal nods, accepting this as his due.

“I think, though, that I’d like ‘Winston’ more than ‘Maveric.’ Is that alright?”

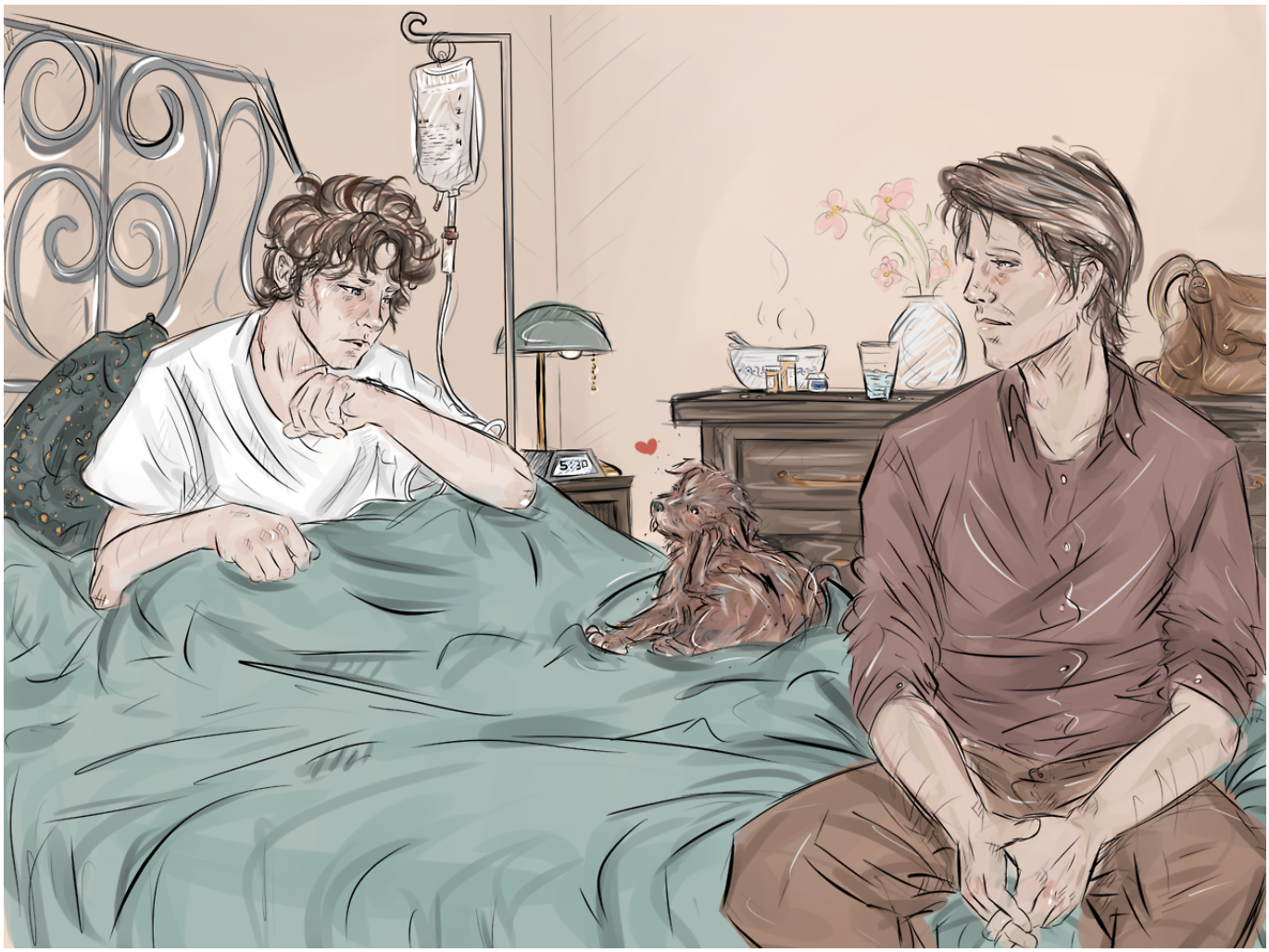
Hannibal pats Will’s knee through the blanks and rises.

“I’ll go get dog food and some supplies,” he says. “You stay in bed.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



Art, by Toni, to go with the last chapter. You can find the original post and her tumblr here.

When they leave behind the cargo plane with its load of squealing shoats, they bring with them little more than what Will can carry in the duffel bag that he slings over his shoulder.

Under cover of darkness they cross from the Haitian side of the island and into the Dominican Republic, and it is like passing into an entirely different world.

Tourists are thick as flies in Punta Cana, and Will explains that he means for them to spend a few days here, solidifying their plans and recovering, before they move on.

When they are ensconced in the hotel room, Hannibal showers away the pig stench, standing under the hot water for nearly half an hour, though by then he feels almost dead on his feet. His feet are blistered raw and his joints, so poorly padded, radiate ache deep into his bones.

He comes out of the bathroom and sees that Will has unpacked some things from the duffle.

The nearly raven-black elk hide, which he shot the winter before, lays across the foot of the bed, just as it had at the safehouse. The golden and cream colored pajamas, that Will gave him the night that he killed Mason, are folded neatly on Hannibal's side of the bed.

Out past the edge of the bed, Will stands watching him. Anxious tics run across his face.

Hannibal sits on the bed, sighing with relief at the softness of it, after so many months sleeping on thin pallets. He runs his hands through the dark fur of the elk skin, then he takes up the pajama bottoms and unfolds them, smoothing the garment out across his lap.

"These are tactile reminders of how good things were before," Hannibal tells him. "They will be just as good again, Will."

Hope wars with grief and wounded shame on Will's face. He opens his mouth, and before he can speak Hannibal says, "Don't apologize."

Will's mouth snaps shut with an audible click. Then he says, "But -"

"Don't tell me how sorry you are or how what happened was all your fault, don't suggest again that we go our separate ways, don't ask me if I'm angry or beg me not to hate you or list all the reasons why you think I should.

"I'm so tired, Will. I know that you're scared and that you are trying not to be - and that you are trying to keep from burdening me with it, but I… I wish that you would stop doing this to yourself.

"I love you. You know that I love you.

"Right now, I just want to have you close to me again. I want you to love me and I want you to let me love you."

"Alright," Will says. "Okay."

Then he starts to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Short short short chapter, but I felt like this needed to stand alone.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When the tears start, Will refuses to allow Hannibal to come to him.

He tries, and Will ducks past him and bolts for the bathroom.

Hannibal hears the lock engage.

He sighs. Then he sits back down on the edge of the bed to wait Will out.

Sleep is a temptation, but Hannibal's control over his own body and its desires is as near to perfect as is humanly possible, and he has faced down worse deprivations.

Will's left the sink running, and not much noise can be made out over the sound of the water.

Eventually, Hannibal hears the rattle of the doorknob as Will turns it. He's slinking, when he peers through the crack in the partially opened door, hoping against hope to go unnoticed, but when he sees Hannibal watching him Will tries to adjust his posture.

He's washed his face and combed his hair, but that layer of surface polish doesn't do much to cover the cracks underneath.

"You should be asleep," Will tells him. "I didn't mean to keep you up."

Hannibal ignores this. "Were you often beaten for crying, when you were a child?" he asks.

"I got the skin tore off me," Will says. "So fucking what? That's not an original observation, Hannibal - I'm fully aware of my own bullshit, thank you very much."

Hannibal watches him carefully. "Are things so difficult for you right now because you think that I'm angry with you, and your expectations are that someone who is angry might try to hurt you? Are you afraid that I'm going to hit you, Will?"

"*Christ*, Hannibal. No." It's a lie, but Hannibal thinks either Will doesn't know that he's lying or wishes that he wasn't. That is, at least, something. "How about you stop reaching now?"

Hannibal remembers Will on the stand, drawing a line to connect his parents' poisoned marriage to his own relationship with Hannibal. It had been an act - all part of the show - but didn't most of Will's lies contain at their center a seed of truth? He swallows back against the taste of bile and asks, "Will, do I remind you of your father?"

That the question blindsides Will is immensely reassuring to Hannibal. He blinks, dazed by his own sense of surprise, then he laughs. It's a bitter laugh, and weak, but it is genuine. "You aren't a mean, petty, bullying, bigoted sonofabitch," Will says. "So no. No, Hannibal, you do not. Don't worry about it."

Then, with a sharper edge in his voice, Will asks, "Do you know what I'd like to do to the people who started those rumors?" He is starting to get angry now. That's good and it's bad. Getting angry,

Hannibal knows, is one of the ways that Will avoids dealing with more difficult feelings, but it at least grants him some refuge. “To Freddie fucking Lounds, specifically?”

“I’d love to find out,” Hannibal says.

Will snorts. “Flirt.”

But it isn’t enough to shut down the meltdown that Will is building towards. “It’s going to get even uglier when they connect Matthew back to me,” he says. “All those old rumors are going to start up again, and everyone is going to believe it this time around.”

Will grinds to a sudden halt.

Hannibal watches him struggle with the implications of that, his chest rising and falling shallowly and at a rapid pace, and then he sees Will battle to hide the feelings those implications to provoke, to secret the pain away from Hannibal and from himself.

He knows that he does not properly understand this thing about Will, the wounded animal mentality of hiding away from his own emotions - the desperation to conceal pain, lest it be read as vulnerability, and the terrified rage that comes upon him when at risk of exposure.

Hannibal has always been as honest with himself as he knows how to be. Being able to be honest about himself with Will has come as a terrific relief.

“It’s natural that this upsets you,” Hannibal says. “It’s tremendously helpful to have you listen when something is weighing on me. Why don’t you let me -”

Will’s pained wince is accompanied by a dangerous flash of teeth. He shakes his head, briefly but violently, and Hannibal knows by instinct that this mirroring of Matthew in his final moments is completely unconscious on Will’s part.

Hannibal frowns. “I don’t understand why you’re still so frightened by the idea of my seeing you, Will.”

“I told you -” Will says, and Hannibal sees how personally and deeply to heart Will has taken the shred of frustration that he hadn’t bothered to keep from his voice. “I warned you - before we even got started I warned you that I didn’t think I could handle that.”

“You did,” Hannibal concedes. “I didn’t understand, I suppose, that accepting that constituted allowing you to gnaw endlessly at your own liver.”

Will laughs. It’s an ugly sound. “If you had any idea just how much is wrong with me - if I tried to make you carry even a tenth of it - you’d be fed up with me by the end of the first day. You’re already running out of patience. I can see it happening now. I’m too fucked up, and I keep fucking up, and there’s no way that you’ll keep putting up with my bullshit.”

Hannibal finds that he would, in fact, like to use his hands on Will very much in this moment - not to hit him, or even cause him pain, but just to shake some sense into that thick skull.

“How much more do you need?” Hannibal asks, and hears the baffled wonderment in his own voice - yes, and the anger, too. “What else could I possibly do to prove myself to you?”

“You don’t understand what it’s like to doubt everything about yourself. You can’t. You’re too strong. You’re too confident - too clear - in your own head about who you are and what you want to be able to understand what it’s like to constantly second guess your own perceptions of yourself on top of everything everybody else says about you.”

“You’re right,” Hannibal says, and he stands and closes the distance between himself and Will.

Will steps back, in retreat. “Don’t you crowd in on me,” he says. “You sonofabitch. You stay away or I'm not going to be responsible -”

Hannibal doesn't listen, and when Will raises a hand - maybe to take a swing at him, maybe to shield his own face - Hannibal catches him by the wrist and presses him back against the wall. Will’s skin is hot to the touch; later, Hannibal will curse himself for not paying more heed to that.

“I don’t doubt; I know what I want. You’re right about that,” he says again. “I know what I want, and what I want is you. Believe it, Will.”

Will is shaking under his touch. “Cry,” Hannibal tells him. “Why won't you cry in front of me? You've done it before.”

“I hate you,” Will snarls at him. “I hate everything you do to me.”

“Liar.”

“What happened to ‘just let me love you’? What happened to ‘let's go to sleep’?”

Hannibal doesn't know. He is aware of his own anger - that he is more angry with Will than he has been at any point since his stay in the basement - and that because of that anger the world has taken on a red haze, but these seem distant facts.

Will’s mouth is very close to his face. His breathing is ragged, but his words come out clipped and precise. “You don't know what I need better than I do, Hannibal. You don't have any fucking right to push me.”

The worlds hit Hannibal like hot water. He feels scalded awake.

“Let go of me,” Will says, and Hannibal can see in Will’s glassy eyes everything he is capable of doing, should Hannibal force him over the edge now. It doesn’t frighten him, but it convinces him that it is in both their best interests that he listen.

Yet it is when Hannibal steps away that Will begins to cry.

He is crying, and Hannibal begins almost at once to think that maybe Will was right to hold it in as well as he could, because there is something about this crying that is badly frightening. Will slides down the wall and folds in on himself as though trying to disappear, his arms curled around himself, nails pressed into his upper arms hard enough to draw lines of blood.

It is terrible and childlike, and Hannibal feels like a mean-spirited and petty bully, and the worst part about it is how Will is still so quiet through it all. He swipes angrily at his eyes, and, far too soon by Hannibal’s estimate, the tears stop falling and are replaced by a vacant-eyed glassiness.

Hannibal is frightened of what might happen if he tries to touch Will now - of what Will might do, not to Hannibal, but to himself.

Instead, he makes tea.

There's camomile in the complementary drink caddy, and Hannibal heats water in the small coffee pot and pours it into a paper cup. He waits while the tea seeps, then drops the bag into the trash and brings it to Will.

Will takes the cup from him. He lets Hannibal drape a blanket around his shoulders.

He sits on the floor, but at a distance and at such an angle that Will won't have to look directly at him. Hannibal doesn't want him to feel trapped.

Will looks down into the cup. "I don't understand this," he says.

"I thought, you know, before you were taken - when this was all starting out - 'he's making a bad choice, but I can see some reasons why he might want me. I can see what I have to offer. I can make him feel less alone. I can understand him - mostly - and I can accept him.' That's easy for me. I'm good at doing that, and who doesn't want understanding and acceptance?

"But you keep getting hurt because of me - I keep hurting you - and every time I try to fix things it just gets worse. How can you ignore that?"

He looks up at Hannibal. "You could have died," he says, and just voicing the idea draws the lines of terror on his face.

"You almost *did* die - at least twice.

"I encouraged you to be violent when I knew better and I put you in harm's way, and if I hadn't done that none of this would have happened.

"You got shot. Arrested. You went through hell and then -

"And then Matthew and the needle. And I keep thinking what it would have been like to open the doors to that ambulance and to see you strapped to that bed, convulsing and dying the way that Matthew did, how it would have been as much my fault as it was when he died, and his dying and the idea of him killing you blur together in my mind, and I see it behind my eyes - I see you dying, and I see Tommy, and I see myself, and it feels *real*.

"And then I remember that it is real. It's real for Matthew. And Hannibal - I know it's wrong of me to grieve for that in front of you. It's wrong of me to make you see that and it's wrong for me to feel it. It's disloyal. I don't get to be the one who is upset - I'm not the one with the batshit boyfriend who almost got me killed.

"And I keep remembering what you told me, when we were getting rid of that bastard of a judge's body, about how if you got caught helping me that they might execute you, too, and how I brushed that off, and then I think about that needle, and…"

He turns his eyes to meet Hannibal's own. "Why?" Will asks, struggling to maintain his gaze, and when Hannibal doesn't understand he says, "Why me? How can you love me?"

"Easily," Hannibal tells him. "It is astonishingly easy."

"I don't understand that," he says again. "Look at yourself. Look at the mess we're in - everything that's happened. How can you really feel that way?

“I’m bad for you. Maybe I’ve been bad for everyone who’s ever gotten close to me.”

He swallows, and Hannibal can hear the dry click in his throat. “They’re going to say that I molested Matthew when he was under my care, you know, that I’m some deranged homo who exploits his patients for sex -"

Will comes to a sudden stop. “I never touched him,” he says.

“I know,” Hannibal says. “I believe you.”

“I never even considered it,” he insists, as though Hannibal hadn’t spoken. “But - but I knew that he’d had a puppy-dog crush on me, and when I saw him again and realized that he was still enamored I used that to get what I wanted. So it’s close enough to the truth, isn’t it?”

“Do you want to know what I think about that - what I really think?” Hannibal asks him.

Fear makes Will’s eyes large when he looks at Hannibal, but he nods.

“I think that Matthew understood the situation perfectly well. He was malleable, perhaps in some ways, but he wasn’t a child anymore, and he knew exactly what he was doing and why. I think he even understood the consequences of being caught, or else he wouldn’t have been so frightened when he realized that he’d been found out.

“And he knew that you weren’t going to trade me in for some shiny new model - he wouldn’t have bothered trying to kill me if you’d given him any real hope that was on the table. He weighed the risks and the rewards and he made his choice, and maybe his perceptions of one or the other were skewed, but he still came to that decision on his own and he’s the only one who’s accountable for it.

“Him, Will. Not you.”

Will is crying again, heavy tears that drip down a face that contorts itself with equal parts pain and doubt and relief. It’s not a good type of crying, but Hannibal thinks it is the closest Will has come to that since they’ve been reunited.

He moves closer to Will, almost near enough to touch, and Will does not cringe away.

“There’s this thread in your thinking,” Hannibal goes on, “that says that you have to make sure that everyone who you care about is okay - that we are all thinking and feeling the things that you want us to think and feel, the things that you believe are good for us - because you think that will cancel out the harm you do to strangers.

“But that’s not the way things are, Will. They’re two separate things, and you have to let people make their own decisions. And you have to trust me to know what I need, even if you don’t understand it.

“I need you. And I need you to stop doubting me. I need you to stop hurting yourself on my account. It doesn't do me any good.”

Will sniffles. Hannibal reaches up and take the box of tissues from the bedside table and hands them to him.

When he’s finished blowing his nose and wiping his face, Will says, “I don’t doubt you.” He can’t meet Hannibal’s eyes, but he tells him, “I don’t doubt that you believe what you are saying when

you say that you love me.

"I just don’t understand it.”

Hannibal moved closer. When he holds his arms open, Will slides towards him and lets Hannibal pull him into his lap and hold him.

“You will,” he promises Will, and runs his fingers through Will’s hair until the shaking stops.

Chapter End Notes

This one was a bear to write but I think they've hit a turning point, at least, and I'm happy for that.

Chapter 4

First of all, today is my birthday, and I've received this lovely gift art from Astrobravo. <333

Secondly, we have a new chapter -

In the morning, Will leaves the room shortly after dawn.

When he comes back, Hannibal is awake. He watches Will from the bed. Will sees his nostrils flare.

“I found breakfast,” he says, stating the obvious, and holds up the Styrofoam to-go boxes.

“Real eggs,” Hannibal says, rising from beneath the covers.

“Mm-hmm,” Will agrees. “With fried salami, *mangú* , and avocado.” He holds up the bottle that’s in his other hand. “And fresh passion fruit juice.”

They sit across from one another at the small table, and the sun comes in through the slats in the window blinds and casts bars of light and shadow across Hannibal’s skin.

Hannibal ruptures the yoke of one of his eggs and dips a slice of avocado in it. “At the prison the eggs came out of a box, like powdered milk. I had it from one of the men who worked in the kitchens that the box did not say, actually, that these were eggs. It said ‘powdered egg food.’”

“I wonder if the distinction is significant.”

“I wouldn’t like to know,” Hannibal says. “It was the same ‘eggs’ at the BSHCI.”

“Sounds like a nightmare.”

“Even at the orphanage we knew no such deprivations.”

“Did you spend a lot of time talking to people, while you were in there?”

“Not at the BSHCI. I was curious if I might see Dolarhyde, but I never did. Mostly, I was alone there.

“It was a bit different at the prison. There were men there - some of them closer to boys, really - who I got along with. They weren’t the same as me but they liked me regardless. I don’t think they belonged there.”

“And do you think that you did? Belong there, I mean?”

“Not for Mason.”

“Are you still thinking about the other one?”

“And Stammets. And Douglass before that.”

“I see.”

“You still think I feel guilty, Will. I don’t. I’m just… acutely aware of the extent to which these things are frowned upon.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“I didn’t have much privacy when I was growing up. It’s hard to shake the sense that you’re under observation and are likely to be reprimanded should you step outside of the lines.”

“But you don’t feel as though you deserve to be punished?”

“I don’t feel any compulsion to submit to the will of people who might seek to punish me. Is the distinction significant?”

“I dunno.” Will’s own sense of guilt is a constant nagging presence in his mind, but it rarely speaks up in objection to the killing.

Hannibal eats around the salami, as Will feared he might, and he feels guilty for that too, but tries not to; instead, he makes a mental note to look harder for some substitution to processed pork next time.

“There was a kid at the prison,” Hannibal goes on. “Caleb. He was there for killing his stepfather, and he reminded me so much of you, only less…”

“Fucked up?” Will offers.

“Less jagged,” he finishes. “I’m glad that you never got caught, Will.”

Hannibal sleeps most of the morning away. Will understands what a strain he's been under, body and soul, and he let's him rest, though he is himself unable to sleep.

He watches Hannibal sleep, the steady rise and fall of his respiration. He wonders how Hannibal can still be so strong in so many ways after everything that has happened to him.

His arm is out from under the blankets, hand curled under his chin, and Will studies the way the shape of the bones can be made out but imagines, nonetheless, that the last two days have worked some benefit and there is at least a bit more meat on him now.

Will leaves rather early to get lunch, so eager is he to get something else to eat into Hannibal, and it's hardly 11am when he sits the meal out on their little table.

He's a bit more daring this time, more confident that Hannibal will have no difficulty with richer fare, and so it is *pollo guisado*, the braised chicken accompanied with a powerful sauce of hot peppers, olives and lime juice. There is *ensalada verde* on the side, and Hannibal’s delight in lettuce that is not wilted and tomatoes and bell peppers that are truly fresh is nearly tactical.

Watching him eat lights a warm, comfortable flame in Will’s center.

There are quipes too, and Hannibal bites into one and says, with admiration, “These taste like kibbeh.”

“Lebanese immigrants have had a heavy influence on the culture here,” Will says.

“Ground bulgur instead of chickpeas, yes?” Hannibal asks, and Will nods.

“I don’t think I would have considered trying that, but the results are fantastic.”

Hannibal chews and swallows. The he asks, “You’ve been following the news?”

“Yeah. They know that I’m with you - that I was the one who pulled off the escape - but that’s about as far as they’ve gotten. That EMT will have been the one who told them that, I’m sure, but it doesn't matter because they would have figured it out pretty quick anyway.”

“They probably know more than they’re releasing to the public.”

“I know it.”

“How is the EMT, by the way?”

“They didn’t really say. But blows to the head usually have more serious long-term effects than stories might lead you to believe, and I clocked her pretty good.” He shrugs. “She isn’t dead. That’s always preferable.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to get out of the restraints in time to fight off Matthew if she hadn’t left them so loose. It was more a matter of not knowing any better than kindness, I suppose, but still.”

“Yeah well. I would have been around to help you a lot sooner if I hadn’t been mucking around with her.” He pauses, mulling over his own emotions. “It’s a strange feeling, you know? I’ve never just let somebody go before.”

“You freed me.”

Will shakes his head. “I didn’t have any choice about that. You had me beat long before I gave you the key.”

Hannibal takes this statement as though it is a confirmation of what he already knew. His smugness is only slightly annoying.

He tells Will, “Saving lives can be thrilling in its own way. I liked that about my work; you rewrite the narrative of the world when you prevent a killing, much in the same way as when you kill. For dozens of people - everyone touched by the life that you caused to go on living or the death that you brought into the world - everything goes differently than it might have been if not for your actions.”

“I’ve prevented suicides,” Will says, perhaps more defensive than he means to be; he wonders if Hannibal considers his own former job more important than Will's own. “Many times.

"There was a sense of power in letting her go, but the idea that I've left her scarred troubles me.

“I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Will goes on, shifting the topic. “I wonder if anyone will cotton to the larger truth.”

“They’d have to look closely to find anything at your house that might connect you to any unsolved cases.”

Will nods, thoughtful. “You were right about the basement, of course,” he allows. “Lucky thing that’s gone.”

Hannibal goes back to bed after lunch, and this time Will joins him.

Laying next to Hannibal, he is ashamed all over again at having kept him up for most of the night when he'd already been so exhausted. *Get your shit together,* he repeats to himself again and again as he waits for sleep that doesn't come, and the words have sharp edges that scratch against the inside of his skull.

Dinner is *asopao,* and the thick chicken and rice soup is a meal all in its own right, though Will has brought more of the same salad that Hannibal enjoyed earlier, and fruit cooked in a sweet syrup for dessert.

"Chilton tried to put me on anti-psychotics," Hannibal tells Will.

Will looks up to meet his eyes. There's a question there, but it isn't an especially urgent one. "You aren't psychotic," Will says, answering what Hannibal hasn't voiced.

"That's what I thought," he says. "I told him that I wasn't."

"What did he say to that?"

"He asked me if I'd ever been molested and left me shackled to the interview table for about six hours."

Will huffs out air and shakes his head in amazement. "Oh, he's good at his job, isn't he?"

"We should pay him a visit, if we ever make it back to the states," Hannibal says, and Will watches him carefully and sees that he is entirely serious. His heart flutters with excitement even as something anxious turns over in his gut.

"I'd like that," Will says. He feels the silence growing rather long, and he gestures with his spoon at the contents of his bowl. "This reminds me of jambalaya."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"I can make you jambalaya again, once we're settled down some place with a kitchen."

"You apologize with food, you know. Ever since the first time you felt that you wronged me, that's been your approach."

Will is relieved to find that the words don't sting.

"'Comfort food,'" he says ruefully, repeating Hannibal's assessment of the meal Will brought him when he was chained in the basement.

The misery of that memory threatens to swamp him, and Will retreats into humor. "I'm a southern gentleman, Hannibal. The way I was raised, the only acceptable emotional display is one of well-bred disgust. You can't expect me to just express my feelings out loud like some sort of functional human being."

"Oh, perish the thought," Hannibal says, in an almost perfect imitation of Will's own voice, complete with the deliberate note of melodrama.

“You know what I think?” Will says. “I think you only have an accent because you want to have one.”

Hannibal smiles and reaches for more *tostones* .

They are back in bed again when Will says, “The thing is that I am psychotic.”

Hannibal turns onto his side to look at him. Will glances his way, and seeing the concern in Hannibal’s expression, Will turns his own face away. He looks up at the ceiling and bites his lip, thinking.

“Just a little,” he adds, and though this the truth he feels cowardly for trying to walk it back. “Mildly. But sometimes I hear or see things that I know aren’t real, but the knowing doesn’t make them any less worrying.”

“You have a powerful imagination,” Hannibal says, and Will hears in his tone the disagreement with Will’s assessment of himself.

“The line between psychosis and imagination is blurry,” Will allows. “But sometimes I cross right over it, especially when I’m under a lot of strain. That was why I didn’t realize how sick I really was when I had the encephalitis. I thought it was just a more serious variation on the same old shit - that my crazy was finally catching up with me.”

Hannibal is silent, but his hand finds Will’s own and squeezes it, and that’s all the reassurance he needs to continue on.

“I’ve never told anyone about this before.”

Hannibal’s voice is soft. “What sort of things do you imagine?”

“Animals in pain - crying out. I can never find them, not to save them or to put them out of their misery.

“And blood. Not good blood, you understand - blood… where I don’t want it to be.

“Creatures, sometimes. Strange things watching me. I don’t know.”

“You can’t tell the difference between these things and things that are real?”

“I know that they aren’t real. But the knowing doesn’t make a difference emotionally.”

He turns his head to look at Hannibal. There is still, after everything that has happened, the voice of the enemy inside him insisting that this will be it - that it was foolish to expose himself in this way, because this will be the thing that convinces Hannibal that he is too strange and damaged to be worth all this trouble, and it is true that Hannibal is looking at him with an expression that tells Will that he cannot relate to this new revelation. But he isn’t angry, just a bit worried, and Will resists the lying voice that insists that Hannibal is worried by rather than for him.

“You’ll tell me, if this starts to give you too much trouble? You'll let me help you?” Hannibal asks.

“Of course,” Will says, and the lie comes easily and rolls smoothly from his tongue with hardly a thought. Perhap he does not even realize that he is lying. “But I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Will folds his hands behind his head and yawns. “I do believe I might actually sleep tonight,” he says. “Memory has almost failed.”

He spends a few seconds enjoying the idea, then he asks, “Belarus next?”

“There’s no great hurry,” Hannibal says, rolling over to lay his head on Will’s chest. The lightness of him, when he used to be such a rock-solid weight, sends Will’s heart into an anxious stutter. Will works without success to control this, acutely aware that Hannibal can hear the palpitations.

“No extradition treaty,” Will reminds him. He curls his arm over Hannibal’s shoulder and strokes the small of his back, and is relieved at least that his hand does not shake.

“That’s really not going to make much of difference if we’re spotted,” Hannibal tells him.

Will shrugs into his pillow. “Whatever you want to do. I’m… not confident about trying to call the shots in this anymore anyway. Seems like everytime I try things go belly up.”

“We can head in that direction soon,” Hannibal says, with a decisiveness that tells Will he’d made up his mind before this conversation ever begun. “But I won’t let Grutas see me until I’m fit again - he won’t die looking at me like I’m still some pathetic starving thing.

“Two months from now,” Hannibal says, and Will feels the declaration rumble through his chest and settle with warm anticipation into his bones.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will sits on the edge of the bed and watches Hannibal as he undresses and folds his dirty clothes neatly on the top of the dresser.

The scars on his shoulders and the back of his neck shift differently with his moments than they did when he was more heavily muscled, and watching that Will feels the humiliation of publicly denouncing their sex life on the witness stand choke him all over again. The memory of Hannibal's anger - feigned to some degree, yet all too real - makes his hands jitter, and beneath the blankets Will threads his fingers together and forces them to be still.

"I remember uncomplicated sex," Will says. Hannibal pauses long enough to look back at him, and Will sees the painfully stark way the vertebrae in his neck press against his skin when he turns his head.

Will's words come at a slow, thoughtful pace; to go any faster would be to risk being tripped up on his own tangled feelings. "I remember how simple and straightforward it was for me to be good to my lovers. I had a talent for that - even a bit of a reputation, when I was younger. I'd fuck them, in whatever way they wanted most, until they lost all inhibitions, and all the while I never worried about my own mask slipping."

Hannibal cocks his head to the side. "Is this dirty talk," he asks, "or are you trying to make me jealous?"

"I'm telling you something about myself that I want you to understand," he says, and his words come carefully not because he really believes that Hannibal has failed to understand his intent, but because bringing these things out into the open where they can both examine them is for Will still a challenge. He knows, though, that he needs to get better at it. "I am explaining that lack of control was never a problem for me before you, Hannibal. Before you, I never worried that I might hurt a partner."

This admission does not trouble Hannibal. "I am unique," he says, and though he has turned away from Will again his pride in this is evident in his posture and his voice. "I don't allow you to hide from me or yourself."

"You won't let me make myself invisible by turning all the focus back to you and I can't manipulate you into seeing me the way I want to be seen. That messes me up. You mess me up."

"Is it difficult for you to see me, now, in the physical sense?"

It is in Will's nature to conceal the truth. Not only to protect Hannibal's feelings but to hide his own sense of unworthiness that his pain at seeing Hannibal so reduced provokes.

Instead of lying, he says, "Seeing what's happened to you hurts like the hurt is on my own body. I'm selfish that way; when I see people I care about in a bad way it makes me feel frantic to fix it because it hurts me too."

“I thought it might be that way for you.”

“I don't want to stop looking at you, though.”

There is a small hitch in Hannibal’s movements. It might be caused by relief, or maybe pleasure, but his back is still to Will so he can't tell for sure.

When he crawls into bed, Will rolls over towards him and begins to tug gently at the elastic ban of his pajama bottoms, watching to see if Hannibal will let him get away with it.

Hannibal stops Will by catching his hands in his own.

“You don't want to mess around?” Will asks, watching Hannibal’s face.

"Do you?"

"What do you think I’m trying to do?"

"Make me feel better about myself," Hannibal answers.

"You’ll feel real good if you let me get you off," Will says, though he knows that’s not what Hannibal means. "But we don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to."

Hannibal pauses before answering. “It’s just that I find that my scent has become unpleasant,” he says.

Will blinks, so astonished by the claim that at first he can hardly credit the idea that Hannibal is serious. “You’ve had five showers in the last 72 hours,” he says. “No one has ever smelled less bad.”

“The stink of the prison and BSHCI soaked in under my skin and are constantly bleeding out through my pores,” Hannibal says, and crinkles his nose with real disgust. “It’s an effect of poor diet, too - because of what I was eating and because I wasn’t eating enough. I don’t smell the way that I am supposed to, and I think that if you were to use your mouth on me, Will, that this would be extremely evident.”

“I think,” Will says, trying to be kind, “that you are overestimating my palatte. You don’t need to worry about this.”

A subtle shade of haunty annoyance comes into Hannibal’s face. “It doesn’t matter if you can’t tell the difference. *I* know that things aren’t right.”

“Listen,” Will says, “if you don’t want to have sex then we won’t have sex, and that’s fine.

“But if all that you’re worried about is *tasting bad* - like I’d give a shit even if you did, Hannibal, honestly - then I don’t have to suck you off. I want to, but I won’t insist if that makes you uncomfortable.

“And, I won’t bite you, either,” he says, and feels his old discomfort in his own inclination towards this specific form of violence swell, even as he craves the chance to mark Hannibal again. “Hell, you’re breaking my heart but I won’t even kiss you if you think I shouldn’t.

“What do you want to do?” he asks, studying Hannibal. Will already knows the answer, but he senses that it is important that he not seem *too* eager to accept it, lest Hannibal feel that Will is relieved to be given an excuse to not touch him.

“I need to wait, Will, until I feel more like myself. I’m sorry.”

“Hey - don’t apologize; I know I’m needy as shit but I’d want to kill myself if I thought I’d pressured you into something you didn’t want.”

He pauses, worrying at his lower lip and thinking about the names and addresses he gave Hannibal. Will hopes that was the right choice - that, if they carry through on it, everything will go well, and Hannibal won’t feel that himself to have been unduly influenced by Will.

Hannibal reaches out and runs fingers through Will’s hair, the trajectory of his hand following the curl of Will’s ear, and Will closes his eyes and lets himself melt into the touch, a low hum vibrating in the back of his throat.

The fingers pause, and behind his closed eyelids Will sees the glow of the bedside lamp as Hannibal clicks it on. Will watches Hannibal’s face as his fingers return to Will’s hair, parting it - looking for something.

It doesn’t hurt when Hannibal plucks the single hair from just behind Will’s temple, nor does it come as much of a shock.

He holds it out for Will, and the gunmetal color of the hair is muted against his skin. “You’re going gray, Will.”

“I know. It was a stressful lot of months,” Will says.

When Hannibal turns off the lights, Will speaks into the darkness. “You don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to do,” he says, “but will you hold me?”

And Hannibal does, gladly, pressing himself to close against Will that he can feel the steady rise and fall of Hannibal’s chest against his own back. With the calm that brings to him rendered so tactile, Will sleeps through the night peacefully.

Chapter End Notes

This was originally going to be a porn chapter, but Will and Hannibal had different ideas. I think it worked out better this way, in any case.

Chapter 6

Hannibal sits on the extravagantly plush lounge in their private train car, slipping the complementary pinot noir and watching out through the picture window as the French countryside, golden in the early autumnal chill, rolls past.

A two-week long luxury hotel train tour across Europe was not what Hannibal had in mind when he suggested that they travel by rail, but as with all the other extravagances and luxuries that Will so often brings into his life, Hannibal finds that he has little trouble allowing himself to enjoy it.

Will is beside him, lulled into sleep by the steady rocking of the train and the soft golden light of the setting sun. Hannibal has long ago noted the way that car rides soothe him, how much more at ease with himself Will is when they are rolling along in the liminal space between where they have been and where they will be, and over the last week it has been much the same whenever the train is moving.

Will's chin rests against his own shoulder. Sleep is rarely an entirely peaceful affair for Will, who is prone towards bad dreams and night terrors, but he is at peace now. His jaw hangs slightly slack, the mouth open just wide enough for Hannibal to see the white of his bottom row of teeth, and his face is soft and untroubled and somehow gentle.

When both their phones buzz at the same time, jarring Will awake, Hannibal feels a spike of irrational anger at the intrusion.

He opens his phone while Will is still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and Hannibal looks down at the news alert and then back up at Will.

"Has it happened?" Will asks, and Hannibal nods.

Within fifteen minutes of the first story connecting Matthew back to Will, more begin to pop up. The train rocks gently beneath them as they read, and Hannibal alternates between looking at the his screen and watching Will from the corner of his eye.

Will has been doing better; he's been telling Hannibal things, sometimes small but often quite personal and fundamental to himself, and to Hannibal it is like watching a rose bloom, new layers of color and texture revealing themselves through the steady march of time. He is delighted to find that he was right about there being so much about Will that he still didn't know, thrilled by each new revelation and the growing trust that is implicit with it. Not even Margot, he knows, has come anywhere close to this level of emotional intimacy; there is no one else in the world who has ever been as close to really knowing Will as Hannibal is now.

Hannibal worries now that this will be an ugly setback, but Will takes it better than he might have dared to hope even a few days ago.

Nonetheless, he remains acutely aware of the possibility of explosion or implosion, especially as the articles begin to take more speculative angles.

Prior to the breakout, it had been taken for granted by nearly everyone with an interest in the case that Hannibal had, during their long stay in hiding and perhaps even before then, brutalized and raped Will. Now, though, what had previously been a fringe opinion - that Will had taken sexual

advantage of an unstable man and brought the entire thing down on himself - is beginning to take off, but with a new spin; Will is cast as the mastermind behind it all, with Hannibal and Matthew as his damaged, hapless victims.

Eventually, Will sits his phone down. “So the story is going to be that I corrupted Matthew, turned him into a killer, and then discarded him when I was bored.” He winces as though his head hurts. “Of course, I’ll do the same to you eventually.”

“It’s all very close to what you expected.”

“Yeah, well - seeing this spin coming doesn’t do anything for anyone, one way or the other. If I’d realized sooner that Matthew was going to try what he did, *that* would have been useful...

“But I thought he was okay, you know? I saw the potential there, from the very start, but I thought that he’d been getting along without it. The killing. You know. I put a lot of work into helping him because I thought that if he had the option to avoid being like me -”

Hannibal cuts him off. “Like us,” he corrects.

Will looks up at him, but only for a second. He can’t maintain the eye contact.

“You were getting along pretty well before you met me - keeping things between the navigational buoys, more or less. I’ve changed that.”

“I make my own choices, Will. I always have. I choose to be one thing and now I’ve chosen to become another. That’s all.”

“How do you figure up your total? Do you count Mason and the tucker as your kills?”

“They’re mine, even if you helped with the logistics or set things into motion.

“They were my choices,” he says again. "I could have done things differently with either of them but choose not to."

“But Matthew was mine.” Hannibal nods. “That’s four, then. Are you a serial killer now? Technically, I mean, according to the official definition?”

“Legally, the first two were not murders. The next one will make it official. I think that’s what I’ve always been, though, in some fundamental way, in the same way an acorn is always and already a tree.”

Hannibal sees the resistance come into Will face; he knows very well that Will does not believe that such things are predetermined, at least not in the case of anyone except himself. “Doesn’t that conflict with what you just said about making choices?” he asks.

It is not a debate Hannibal wants to have right now.

Instead of answering, he says, “What’s your total, Will?”

Will deflects. “You know, I had a bad couple of hours after the thing in the basement. I couldn't remember the answer to that question, and that terrified me.”

“Why?”

Will's forehead wrinkles and his mouth turns down in a thin frown, and Hannibal knows that he is doing this best to find a way to answer the question honestly.

"I felt like… if I couldn't remember the number of people who I've killed, that would mean not only that I am insane and… completely out of control, but that I've wasted those deaths by failing to remember and benefit from them, and this failure to hold them in my mind and heart would mean that I'd really done something wrong."

Something that is to Hannibal quite uncanny a bit alarming clicks into place. "You feel affection for them."

Will hesitates, sensing perhaps that this is uncertain ground. Then he says, "In a certain way. How could I not? They helped me."

"I… don't think that's something I'm capable of understanding, Will."

There's a dull ache to the quiet that follows, but it does not stretch on for too long.

Hannibal says, "But you remembered eventually."

"Eventually," Will agrees. "I got myself calmed down enough to sit down and shift through my memories and count them up, until I was certain that I'd forgotten no one, but it shook me up for a while after that."

"And?"

"And?" Will repeats.

"What's your number?"

Will hesitates. His hands, balled together in his lap, squirm, fingers clawing at the backs of his palms anxiously. "You won't be outraged?"

Hannibal makes his face reassuring. "No, Will. I won't be angry with you."

"And you won't judge me?"

"Will -"

"Nineteen."

Hannibal makes a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat.

Will's mouth twitches anxiously. "That's a lie, what I just told you," he admits. "Nineteen was the number right after what happened in the basement. It's higher now."

Hannibal does the math; the judge, one of the paramedics and Matthew. "Twenty-two, then."

"No," Will says, and there's an anxious tic in his face; the self-effacing smile that Hannibal knows is supposed to pacify him keeps flickering away into an anxious grimace. "It's a solid two dozen now."

"When did you…?"

“I was under a lot of stress while you were away. I tried to bleed some of it off.”

Hannibal shakes his head, somewhere between astonishment and humor. “You’re unbelievable.”

Will makes a sour face. “You’re the one who asked.”

“Well. I suppose that I expected it to be larger.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Will says, a shade sharply. “I don’t usually run as hot as I have been lately, you know. Things have just been… complicated.”

“And I mess you up.”

“Yeah.”

“In the normal course of things, do you have a cooling off period?”

Will spends longer thinking about that than Hannibal would have thought necessary. “I guess so? Usually there’s at least six months in between, but a few times I’ve gone a year or two or even more.

“I used to get bad around the holidays, Christmas especially - Christ, I hate Christmas - but since Tommy was born that hasn’t been as much of a problem. Hard to get bogged under by bad memories when the kid is so excited, you know?”

“Not usually clusters, then -” Hannibal begins, but Will winces again, as though his voice causes him pain. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Will tells him, but the shake of his head says ‘no.’ “Listen, I enjoy talking with this about you - or anyway, I’d trying to get used to it because once I do I think I’ll like it - but I don’t feel great, you know? I’m going try to lay down for a little while.”

“Alright,” Hannibal agrees easily, but his eyes track Will’s movements until he slides the door shut behind himself and disappears from view.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a new note to the scent of Will's skin, unlike anything Hannibal has encountered before and not at all unpleasant. It is white hot and as sweet as burnt sugar, and Hannibal breathes it in as he kisses his way up the insides of Will's thighs, imagining it to be the scent of pent up desire.

Under Hannibal's ministrations, Will laughs. The beard Hannibal has spent the last two weeks growing tickles against Will's skin, and helplessly he kicks out with his feet, laughing and laughing, and Hannibal would like to catch that open and delighted laughter in a gold chalice and drink it down like wine.

Battling against the bubbling hilarity, Will bites the side of his own hand to try to keep the rest of the laughter in, and the scent of oxidation adds its flavor the air, but Will is unconcerned by this and he throws his head back and laughs despite his bleeding palm, and the sight of his extended neck is such a thing of beauty that Hannibal finds that he must crawl over him and bury his own face under Will's chin, nipping along the edge of his jaw and feeling the rasp of Will's own three-day stubble against his skin.

"Turn over," Hannibal says, and Will does - eagerly.

When he feels Hannibal's slicked finger tease his hole, circling it, he pushes back into the touch, nearly frantic to feel again the boneless delight of having Hannibal inside of him.

"Hurry," Will says. "Hannibal - hurry."

"Oh no," Hannibal says, and Will hears the cunning pleasure in his voice, an almost predatory joy. "This is too nice a job to rush," and Will would like to groan with frustration, but it becomes a warm sigh halfway through, as Hannibal works his fingers further inside. He lays the side of his head down against the pillow and breathes deeply, relaxing into himself while the train sways mellowly around them.

When Hannibal's hand closes around Will's shoulder it is not to balance himself as he enters Will, but to rather to turn Will gently back onto his back.

"Hannibal -" Will says again, but uncertainly this time.

Hannibal shushes him. "It's alright," he says. "Trust me."

And Will does.

He takes the wrapped condom from Hannibal's hand and draws it over Hannibal's cock himself, and Hannibal watches how his hands tremble with eagerness as he does this, and the avid way that Will stares down at Hannibal's cock as his own erection twitches against his belly.

"Be careful," Will says, faintly, when Hannibal draws him against himself.

“Be so careful,” he sighs again, and clings to Hannibal's shoulders as Hannibal reaches down to guide himself, one hand steering his cock as the other clutches Will’s ass. Then he is in and their arms tangle around one another again as Hannibal pulls Will closer.

Will gasps with shocked delight when he feels the first movement of Hannibal’s cock inside him, and astonishes them both when the laughter comes bubbling up again, a euphoric giggle. “It feels different this way,” he breathes, astounded.

“I know,” Hannibal says. “I told you it would be good,” yet he can feel the fear starting to creep in on Will - fear of his own vulnerability and openness, the possibility of being hurt, yes, but much more for Hannibal's own safety, should he lose control of himself with Hannibal's jugular pumping sedately just inches above his nose.

“You're safe,” he says, fingers cupping the back of Will’s skull and coiling around his hair. “You're safe, Will.” And he says three times, in slow procession, the words coming in time with the pumping of his hips, “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Will's face is pressed against Hannibal’s shoulder, and he feels, at the time of Will's climax, the skinning back of Will's lips and the press of the flats of Will’s teeth against his skin, but his jaw does not open and no sharpness follows.

Instead, Hannibal feels tears burning on his skin. “Thank you,” Will says, pressing his face harder against Hannibal, as if Will means to nuzzle his way underneath his skin. “Thank you for loving me,” and Hannibal feels the shape of the words against his skin as Will speaks. Will's fingers claw at his back, trying to draw them somehow closer, and later there will be red lines on Hannibal’s skin, but the only blood will be from Will's own wounded palm.

Hannibal’s body goes taut and rigid as he comes, and in his arms Will's body stiffens in sympathy and then relaxes at the same instant as Hannibal’s own.

It is a long time before Will is willing to let go.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this is one of the best things I’ve ever written, honestly.

(And I feel sort of weird about that, on a lot of levels, since it’s a sex scene, but).

I’ve been struggling with it for a couple of weeks now. Where does it fit in the narrative? How much time should I spend describing the bedroom on the train? What do they talk about during?

What is the chapter really ABOUT?

I thought maybe it was about rediscovering one another’s bodies for a while, or accepting that Hannibal’s body had changed but was healing, and even as of this morning I thought it was going to be about their coming to a realization that this relationship is now fundamentally different from how it had been because they have both been changed.

But I was wrong about all of that.

It’s much more simple.

It’s just about Will finally accepting, all the way down into his bones, that Hannibal does love him and coming at last to trust that this love is good for both of them.

And I'm just really happy about this chapter.

Chapter 8

Minsk is a city of monumental Soviet architecture and open, uncluttered spaces. The streets are almost preternaturally clean.

Will and Hannibal walk side by side through one of the city's many forested parks, close to one another but not touching. The bright lights that illuminate the path before them buzz faintly, and Will hears in them the rasp of angry wasps and has to fight to keep himself from flinching away whenever they draw close to a new lamp post.

The moon is a bright orb above them, and when Will looks up at it he see that it has taken on a red sheen, as though coated in blood.

They both carry canvas shopping bags, though Will's are considerably heavier. Another week has gone by, and Hannibal has now had a month to recover, but Will is still insistent upon taking the larger load. Hannibal no longer attracts the kind of stares that denote that the onlooker is wondering if he is actively dying, but he is only now beginning to resemble anything other than an extremely ill man.

"I hate this," Will says. "Walking along on a night like this and not being allowed to touch you." He is cold - though it is only early October, the temperature is close to freezing - and believes that curling his own body against Hannibal's, bony though it still may be, would be an immense comfort, but Will's resentment goes deeper than that.

Everything Will read prior to their coming to Belarus cautioned that the police here are violent and corrupt and that homophobia is rampant. Though Hannibal has never before visited this country, it shares a border and much else with his native Lithuania, and when presented with these assessments he conceded that they were very likely correct.

So they are being careful.

Will knows that's the smart thing to do, but it's hard for him to stomach."My queer ass didn't survive growing up in Louisiana to pussyfoot around this shit now," he grumbles. "Not at this late date.

"And not when I finally have a man worth showing off," he goes on, and is at least gratified by the faint but self-satisfied smile his words provoke from Hannibal.

But of course, that is exactly what he is doing now, and he knows that he will continue to do just that, because to do otherwise might cost him Hannibal. It is vital that they remain inconspicuous.

He is counting down the days, though, until Hannibal feels himself fit enough to confront and slay Grutas, in hopes that they might then depart for better climes.

The stymied rage and the idea of seeing Hannibal kill the old Nazi turns Will's thoughts bloody, and he points with his chin at the man walking some distance ahead of them on the well-lit footpath.

Thick woods surround them on either side, and the shadows move strangely among the branches, as though there are living things watching them from the darkness, and Will shies away from the

anxiety the thought provokes; his imagination has been getting away from him lately.

“We could set our own pace just a little quicker than his own, so he wouldn’t feel startled or threatened when we caught up to him and seemed about ready to pass by. Check to see that the coast is clear and then you could grab him from behind and cover his mouth while I caught his legs, and we could carry him off into the shadows.”

Will cuts his eyes towards Hannibal, and sees that he is watching him with a sort of indulgent curiosity. “What would you do then?”

“We’d gag him and tie him standing up against a tree, so he’d have a clear line of sight to the bright path but would be hidden from view by the darkness. He’d see the people passing by as I cut him, their lives still peaceful and uninterrupted while his own dribbled out in thin red lines down into the dead leaves.

“He’d be seized by the understanding that it is only ugly stupid bad luck that placed him in this position instead of one of those carefree others, and the existential bitterness of that would fill him and hurt more than the cut of the knife. I’d use a sharp blade for it, in fact, so he’d barely feel its bite, and then instead of the pain he would focus on the feeling of the blood flowing out of him and the vacant chill seeping in where that blood ought to be and on the helplessness of knowing that help is right there, within his line of sight, but that he is helpless to reach out for it.

“Let him long towards the people and the light, and when he is nearly gone - when he is on the verge of unconsciousness and the light becomes a brilliant kaleidoscope in his blurred vision - cut him free and let him stagger forward half a dozen steps, bleeding, towards that light, and then yank his head back by the hair and open his throat.”

Hannibal’s voice is thoughtful. “You’d allow me to carry out that final part?”

“You could do whatever pleased you.”

“It’s the distress that’s important to you - inducing desperation and helplessness and dread. Vulnerability.”

Will wets his lips. The bite of the chill wind suddenly feels like exposure, and he becomes overwhelmingly conscious of his own vulnerability; not simply worried that he has gone too far in Hannibal’s eyes - admitted to a desire for too much of the wrong kind of violence, or else been too obvious about how much of this has to do with projecting the things he hates most about himself onto his targets - but also paranoid that they have somehow been overheard.

But he ties to shake this off. “Compared to all of that, I suppose that I hardly care much at all about provoking physical pain.”

“Pain is a means to an end?”

“Yeah. Most of the time."

“Hmm.” Hannibal seems on the verge of saying something else, but then decides against it.

The man is still ahead of them, oblivious that he has become a topic of conversation and speculation.

There’s a good folding knife in Will’s pocket. He has no rope, but he knows how to make do. “We could -” he starts, but is cut off by Hannibal’s laugh.

The laugh is indulgent, but it is a good as a ‘no.’

“This entire country averages less murders per year than the city of Chicago,” he tells Will. “Don't expect to go under the radar the way you could back home.”

Will finds himself feeling contrary. “Maybe that means that they aren't as good at investigating murder cases - less experience and all.”

Hannibal looks at him, and for the first time in the course of this conversation, Will catches twin ghosts of annoyance and anxiety in his eyes.

It’s easy to understand the cause.

“Don't worry,” Will reassures him. “I’m just talking. I won't do anything to risk spoiling your shot at Grutas.”

Chapter 9

AMAZING gift art from red-earth-rising to go with Chapter Three of this story. <3333

“Let me see Hannibal,” Margot says, and obediently Will stands, the tablet in hand, and carries it to Hannibal. She sees a sweeping view of the living room of their apartment, of the furniture that looks like it came from Ikea and the plain white walls. Will strikes her as terribly out of place among such trappings.

Hannibal’s mouth fills her screen. She sees the slant of his teeth, huge, and the brief smile that passes across his magnified lips. Then he readjusts the tablet and she can see the rest of his face, which by then has returned to its typical neutrality.

“You look better,” she says, and it’s the truth; he’s still at least fifteen pounds shy of what would be for his frame a bare minimum healthy weight, but the improvement is profound. “Will’s a good cook, isn’t he?”

Something flickers across Hannibal’s face, but it’s gone so quickly that it barely even consciously registers for Margot. “One of the best,” Hannibal agrees. “Though I’m considerably better.”

Will makes an offended sound and snatches the tablet back. He sits down in one of the sharp-edged, modern-looking chairs and asks, “How are you, Margot?”

“Worried,” she admits.

“One of the chickens died,” she begins, and sees Will’s eyes flick up from the screen, checking Hannibal’s response. “Not the little silkie,” she reassures him. “One of the reds.”

She sees the relief in Will’s face, mediated by sadness at having lost any of them, and wonders if there is anything similar in Hannibal’s expression, but he is out of frame.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Will says. “What happened?”

“A weasel got into the hen house and ate most of her,” Margot says flatly.

Will winces. “That’s never a pretty sight. You'll need to get someone out to trap it or this is just going to happen again.”

“I already have - they took the damn thing away to be re-released somewhere else. I didn’t ask where.

“The issue,” she says, “is that Thomas was the one to find her.”

“Oh.”

“He’s been crying a lot since then. I’m worried about him.”

There is a painful earnestness to Will’s face and his voice when he says, “Let him cry. There’s nothing wrong with him crying if he needs to.”

And Margot, who herself grew up on the receiving end of violent reprimands for daring to allow her tears to fall, and who easily recognizes the same damage in Will, feels simultaneously a stab of sympathy and annoyance. “Do you think I’d punish him for crying?”

“No,” Will says. “I’d never think that, Margot.”

“That’s not what it sounded like.”

“I know and I’m sorry. That was a defensive reflex, and it had nothing whatsoever to do with you.”

“Okay,” she says. “Good.

“I’d never try to force him to stop crying,” she goes on. “But he’s been… so upset, Will, for days now. I don’t know if it’s healthy.”

She hesitates, afraid that speaking her fear into the space between them will make it so. “He’s so fragile.”

“No,” Will says, and she sees the way he sets his face and pitches his voice to be reassuring. The effort is so desperate that it becomes almost a caricature of reassurance. “Just sensitive. There’s nothing wrong with that anymore than there is his crying when he’s upset."

Margot's own face remains impassive. "I'm worried that this is the kind of thing that might scar him."

Will winces like he was expecting this exact blow. "Listen," he tells her, "a hundred farm kids wake up to that type of thing every morning They make it through, they cope, they leave it behind them."

"Maybe so, but Tommy isn't like most children."

She sees him turn defensive and then she sees him working to control that reaction. His voice is mild when he says, "If it's he picked up from me, that sensitivity - fragility, if that's how you want to put it - isn't something about myself that I hid from you. I seem to remember that being one of my major selling points."

No, she thinks, *I knew you were prone towards fragility, but you never told me how you cut when you're shattered.*

"Put him on the phone," Will says. "I'll talk to him about it."

Margot rises from her chair and goes back into the playroom. She brings Tommy back to her office with her, sits down and then coaxes him into her lap.

He's pallid in the self-view window, and the skin under his eyes is dark as a bruise. She sees that Will's own skin is an almost perfect match, in both regards, and thought she had been too focused on Tommy to put much thought into anything else, she feels a sudden concern for Will as well.

"Hey, Buddy," Will says. "How are you?"

Tommy squirms in Margot's lap, evading the question.

Will gives him a bit of time, then tries a different prompt. "Did something bad happen to one of our chickens?"

The boy wets his lips and nods. "She laid down badly because she was hurt."

"Which one was it?" Will asks.

"The old lady."

There's nothing but sincere sympathy in Will's voice when he answers, "Oh no. She's the one who yelled so much whenever the other chickens sat in her nest, wasn't she? I liked her a lot. Did you like her?"

"Uh-huh. But the yelling gave me a headache."

"Do you understand what happened?"

Tommy nods, but only to be agreeable; the uncertainty on his face makes Margot's chest ache, and she folds her arms around him.

"What happened is that she died," Will explains, in a voice that, though calm and patient, nonetheless allows his own sadness to show through. "That means that her body stopped working."

“Ow,” Tommy says, and his hand goes to his own throat. The chicken had been ravaged there. “She has a hole in her. I don’t like it because it hurts.”

“She isn’t hurting,” Will reassures him. “When a person or an animal is dead that means they can’t feel pain anymore.”

Thomas cast his eyes down, but a stubbornness settles into his features. “It hurts,” he insists, and the tears start to well again.

“It hurts you?” Will says. Tommy looks up and nods emphatically. “That’s okay. It feels bad but that doesn’t mean that you’re bad or that you did anything wrong,” Will assures him.

“When you feel bad because someone else feels bad that’s called empathy. Empathy happens when you feel the same way someone else does, and that doesn’t just happen with sad or painful things. Empathy the same reason why you want to smile and laugh when your mom is happy. You see?"

The nod this time is tentative but thoughtful.

“Can we talk about how Old Lady dying makes you feel? I want to, okay?”

Tommy repeats, “Okay,” but then he doesn’t say anything else. He sniffles and knuckles at his eyes. Margot takes a kleenex from the box on the coffee table and gives him one.

“I’ll go first,” Will offers.

“I’m angry about this,” he tells Tommy, though Margot notes that he is careful to let only a shade of that anger come into his voice, lest Tommy feel it directed at himself. “I’m angry at the weasel. He did that because he was hungry, but I’m still angry with him. And I’m really sad. Are you sad too?”

“I’m sad in my belly.”

“It gives you a stomach ache.”

“I threw up two times. I barfed because of the hole.”

“That can happen when we’re really upset. And Sunshine, I’m so sorry that you’re so upset. You are allow to be sad and upset for as long as you need to, but remember that you’re not going to feel like this forever. It will go away after a while. Okay?”

When the boy starts to cry harder, Margot thinks - or, at least, hopes - that it is from relief. He turns away from the camera and clings to her, his face buried in her chest, and the sobbing racks his small body.

“I’m going to call you back,” she tells Will, and closes the chat window.

“Did she end the call?” Hannibal asks.

“Yeah.”

“I have a question.”

Will closes his eyes; the sense of exhaustion that has been dogging him since they arrived in Minsk suddenly lands on him with both feet. But he pushes it away and powers through. “No, Hannibal, I never tried to feed her the meat.”

Hannibal is watching him intently; his regard feels like an accusation, and like a fly crawling around inside Will's skull. “You didn’t want to?”

“I couldn’t have gotten away with it and I knew that.

“Margot wasn’t groomed for the family business like Mason was, but a number of his lessons took place at the dinner table. She has a fine palette for identifying the breed of hog from the taste of the meat, as well as its age, sex and what type of feed its been eating. She would have known something was off.”

“What would you have done if she found out?”

“I don’t have any idea. Beg her to keep it to herself, I suppose, or else run. Or I might have killed myself, I don't know. But I never would have dreamed of risking it.” There is anxious beat. “Don’t tell her about that.”

“Of course.”

“Anyway, she practically a vegetarian when she can get away with it, which wasn’t often when her father and Mason were alive - dinner in that household was usually five courses of variations on pork. When I cooked for her I tended to focus on the inclusion of actual, you know, vegetables.”

“I noticed that when you made us dinner, right after you broke me out. I suppose I assumed that was for my sake.”

“I wanted to go easy on your stomach, too, Hannibal. But I would have -”

The computer chimes.

Before Will can answer, Hannibal says, “I’m drawing from a skewed sample, granted, but that's the most well-adjusted child I've ever seen.”

“I know it,” Will says, and reconnects with Margot.

“So that's what's going on,” she tells him. “Is it okay?”

Will gestures Hannibal over, and he crouches lithely next to Will’s chair to bring his face level with the camera. “Would you repeat what you just said, please?”

Hannibal does. And he adds, “If he was my charge, I would have approached it almost exactly the same way as Will did. That’s how the adults who were good at their jobs handled the topic of death at the orphanage, and though most of those children were dealing with the lose of their parents, the approach holds essentially true for a pet.

“He isn’t old enough to grasp the permanency of death, and it’s like anything else with children - they’ll ask the same question many times as they work on internalizing the answer. Let him talk about it but don’t encourage him to dwell on it, and let him cry as often as he needs to.”

There is something warm and fluttery in Will's chest, but he keeps his voice cheerfully sardonic. "So, Margot, if you don't believe me…" He is only slightly annoyed by the fact that Hannibal's explanation seems to have indeed reassured her more than his own efforts.

Will turns his head to look at Hannibal. "Could you leave the room for a bit?" he asks, and Hannibal nods and stands back up.

When they're alone, Will says, "I think it's fine, but this isn't my area. Take him to a child therapist if that gives you some peace of mind. It isn't likely to hurt. I honestly don't think that there's a problem, though. This is just the kind of person he's going to be - anything that happens is going to processed through his heart above all else."

"My thought was, Will, that you are in a unique position to tell me if I've taken any missteps."

Will tries to smile, but he knows he's doing a poor job of it. "Would you like a written blow-by-blow guide to everything that fucked me up, so you can avoid the same mistakes?"

"Don't be an ass - of course I want to know that. Trying to avoid wounding your child the way that your own parents' wounded you is ninety percent of parenting, Will."

"And you've been doing a fantastic job at that, Margot. We used to talk about this, remember? The self-doubt you're feeling isn't justified.

"That's what I wanted to ask you about," he goes on, "and why I asked Hannibal to leave. Have you found another psychiatrist?"

"I hadn't even thought to look. There's been no time."

"Would you consider, then, continuing our sessions?" He finds the emotional energy to smile. "I can't exactly bill your insurance, but…"

He sees her considering it, but then she shakes her head. "I think you have enough on your plate already. You look strained, Will. Have you been sleeping?"

"You kidding? All we do around here is sleep - at least when we aren't cooking and eating. This is as carefree as life gets." The truth is, there have been days when Will has barely been able to find the will to get out of bed, but he needn't tell Margot this.

"I'm happier than I've ever been in my life," he says instead, and that's the truth, too. "Don't worry about me."

Chapter 10

After Margot hangs up, Will goes looking for Hannibal.

He finds him lounging in the bed. He's on his back, a book on Russian grammar held suspended above his eyes in one hand.

"I'll admit that when you first told me about caring for the smaller children at the orphanage I had some trouble picturing you that role," he says, as he climbs into the bed next to Hannibal.

Will rests the back of his head on Hannibal's bicep and looks up at the book hanging above them. The cyrillic text remains an enigma to him; Hannibal picks up new words as easily as breathing, but Will has struggled to retain anything. "It's easier for me to see it now.

"You ought to have been a father, you know. You'd be a good father."

Hannibal put the book down on the bedside table and turns his head to look at him, and Will can see the sense of regret laying sedately beneath the lines of his face, but understands that it has nothing to do with Will or the situation that they have found themselves in; it's dull with age, what Hannibal is feeling, though not entirely incapable of inflicting discomfort.

"Do you know," Hannibal says, "that before I met you I'd given up the idea that anyone would ever love me?"

Will knows this perfectly well, but is embarrassed to admit it. There is something in him that cringes away from Hannibal's professions of Will's own love for him, that insists that Hannibal has no idea what he is talking about - that he is badly wrong and may yet learn this to his peril. That voice is calm and implacable, and it tells Will that he is not capable of reciprocating such love because honesty and love will always for him be mutually exclusive categories.

It strikes Will as infuriating and deeply unfair that this voice should seem only to grow louder the more secure he becomes in this relationship and the happiness it brings him, but he works hard to ignore it.

"Plenty of people loved me," he says instead. "They didn't know me, but they believed that they loved me and they acted accordingly. That was lonesome, but I wasn't alone the way that you were."

"I wasn't always as… strange and withdrawn as I was when you first met me," Hannibal says.

Will remembers perfectly well the air that Hannibal had about him in those early sessions; he'd seemed either completely disconnected emotionally from their conversations, or else dangerously wounded and on the verge of explosion. He remembers also, Hannibal's own acute awareness that there was something about him that made others feel suspicious and uneasy.

"You were catastrophically depressed."

Ruefully, Hannibal says, "I'd had a couple of bad decades, is the thing.

“I was withdrawn when I arrived at the orphanage - I barely spoke a word those first two years - but I knew how to work and I was intentive about my studies, and it didn’t take long for my teachers to recognize that I was brilliant.

“They liked that about me. I was liked, but more importantly I was *trusted* . I was seen as steady and responsible, if not emotionally demonstrative. No one questioned the idea that I be placed in a caretaker role, at least not in my hearing.

“At the time, the government spoke of gender equality as an important goal for the future of society. A teenage boy with a willingness and an aptitude for working with small children was seen as a victory for Soviet socialization.”

Will can’t quite parse the irony in Hannibal’s faint smile, and thinks perhaps it another one of those disconnects that do exist between them, where their experiences have been so different as to be nearly incomprehensible for the other.

He tries. “I have the sense that wasn't terribly important to you.”

“I was always bad at internalizing social norms, even when I was very small.

“I dislike disorder. The work needed done so I did it to the best of my ability, which is typically exceptional. And then… there was Mischa, too.”

Will nods; of course. So much about Hannibal boils down to Mischa.

“I couldn’t see her safe and fed. I couldn’t get revenge. I couldn’t take any of it back.”

He pauses. And Will waits, conscious of the potentiality of tears.

The moment pases, and Hannibal is matter-of-fact as he continues.

“I could make sure things were different for the other children. And I was important to them; they considered me to be authoritative and wise. I enjoyed the regard.

“And it all made my mentors think that much more highly of me. They thought that I had the potential to be a talented pediatrician, maybe even a child surgeon. In retrospect, that’s all quite good for a silent starving waif who wandered into town on bloody and frostbitten bare feet, isn’t it?”

It’s a rhetorical question, and Will doesn’t answer, but he allows what’s in his heart to show plainly in his face. Hannibal leans in and kisses him on the forehead, as though from gratitude.

He changes tract suddenly. “I was pleased when I found my way into the profiling work.

“I’d lied on my entrance examine at the police academy. I deliberately manipulated my answers so they would score my IQ as being considerably lower than actually is because I knew they wouldn’t allow me to stay an officer otherwise - they’d want me as a detective or sergeant, maybe even a lieutenant, and that wasn't what I was after.”

“Why not?”

“I'm not entirely sure. I wanted… change. I left home for somewhere entirely new, and I found that it awoke in me a craving towards the possibility of becoming someone completely different from

what everyone else had always expected. It was stupid adolescent rebellion, on a certain level, I suppose.

“Imagine how different everything might have shaped out if I'd stayed in university and become a doctor,” he says, and then he laughs.

“I’ve a considerable ego,” Hannibal allows, after a pause.

“No kidding?”

Hannibal ignores him. “And I am proud. And I’d been used to being recognized as the smartest person in any given room. That was something that changed when I went into the force, and it annoyed me.

“But after I joined the FBI I began to being recognized as brilliant again, but only in relationship to my ability to perdict the actions of killers’. That wasn't the kind of brilliance people admire or praise, or even want to be close to. That kind of brillance is seen as suspicious, and not without cause.

“It wasn’t like how things were when I was still a boy. I wasn’t be read as emotionally reserved or standoffish or even strange. None of it was attributed to trauma, which before had lent me a certain degree of leniency when I acted oddly. Instead, I was seen as being just a hair shy of actively dangerous.”

“A hair,” Will repeats, and shakes his head in amazement. “Was that another pun?”

Hannibal makes no effort to hide his delight, fleeting as it is.

“You are *dreadful*,” Will tells him.

Hannibal’s smile fades as he returns to his story.

“I understood why they felt that way about me, and I had already been accustomed to standing apart, but after a while the sense of alienation became... profound.

“It isn’t as though they were wrong,” he says, with that note of rational acceptance that Will has hated so much ever since the first time he heard Hannibal use it. “And I accepted that I wasn’t normal, but I wanted to believe that my work not only made a difference, but that I had more to offer than that.”

Will snuggles in closer against him. He lays his palm over Hannibal’s chest and feels the steady beat under his hand as he thinks about everything Hannibal has offered him. Hannibal is for a few minutes quiet under his touch, contented even to be given so little in return.

After a little while he continues. “I used to go out the clubs. Are you old enough to remember how it was, back in the early 90s? For the first time, you were starting to see a large number of gay men really talking about… the possibility of families. About asserting our right to domesticity and children and a home life.”

“That was just starting when I was coming up,” Will says. “I have an idea of how things were before that, but it’s all mostly second hand.”

“It was revolutionary to me, to hear so many people saying what I’d been thinking all along. I *wanted* that. I wanted a steady lover. I wanted a relationship and I wanted someone to care enough to *want* to really know me - see me - even if I didn’t think that it would possible to ever be entirely honest with someone else.”

“But it didn’t happen,” Will says, and sighs for him.

“Not for a long time,” Hannibal says, and Will feels his fingers twining in his hair.

“I suppose I understand now what the problem was - why I never felt a real connection with any of them - but at the time I was… deeply frustrated.

“So often it seemed like men looked at me and saw someone who seemed a little dangerous, and that was sexy to some of them. I’d be approached by men who were looking for a quick, rough fuck - that’s what they thought I was good for, how they imagined sleeping with me would be - and when they found out they were wrong they usually lost interest.

“There were a few who stayed for a little while - short, disappointing relationships - but it didn’t take them long to realize how damaged I actually was. I wanted more than they were willing to give, or else they realized that I really was dangerous and not just dangerous looking. I think that they walked away feeling as though they had dodged a bullet.

“After a point it became obvious that I was wasting my time. I accepted that I was incapable of making the type of connections with others that I was supposed to be able to make, and that this wasn’t going to change, and that in a lover this was a deficiency that would not be overlooked or forgiven.”

“Aren’t you happy to be wrong?”

“I can still hardly believe it,” Hannibal tells him. “This feels like an impossible confluence of fate and circumstance, that we found each other - that this works the way that it does.”

“Oh lord,” Will says, and puts his hands over his face to hide the blushing from his own delighted embarrassment. “Sap! Sap, Hannibal. It’s so embarrassing.”

Hannibal rolls over on top of him. He straddles Will, and standing up on his knees he pries Will’s fingers away to reveal his grinning, bright red face. “I’m embarrassed for you,” he tells Hannibal. “Sincerely.”

Hannibal leans down to kiss him, and Will lifts his head to meet Hannibal’s lips.

“I love you, you know,” Will says, when they come apart. "I do."

“I know,” Hannibal says, with an easy certainty that provokes in Will a certain degree of jealousy along with the warm affection.

He leans down again, angling away from Will’s ready mouth and towards the the junction of his shoulder and neck. Will expects to feel the kisses fall there, perhaps just below his ear, but instead Hannibal pauses and breathes him in.

“Are you using something?” he asks, and there is a slim edge of worry to his voice. “Some new soap or aftershave that you didn’t have before I was arrested?”

“I’m using the same aftershave you wanted me to use, since you are so damn picky,” Will says, and he wants his voice to sound teasing but he can feel Hannibal’s vague uneasyness underneath his own skin, and the anxiety multiplies inside of him and makes his voice sharper than he means for it to be. “We share a bathroom - there’s nothing in there that you don’t know about.”

“I suppose I know that,” Hannibal says, annoyed now too.

“Then what’s the matter?”

Hannibal shakes his head, a small gesture. “It’s nothing,” he says. “I'm just being odd.” He smiles down at Will, and if his entire heart isn’t in it Will attributes that to his having been snappish.

To make up for it, and because he very much wants to anyway, Will curls his hands around the back of Hannibal’s neck and draws him down into another long kiss.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Your lover drinks more than is good for him," Mr. Javok says in Russian, as he lowers himself with arthritic grace down into the kitchen chair. There is pity in his tone, but little condemnation. "Even by our standards."

Hannibal, who is busy laying out the place settings, does not falter as the significance of the old man's words strike home. After a second, though, he looks up at Javok and says in the same language, "I know."

Elegance still escapes him with his Russian, and there are things that Hannibal might like to confide, if it did not feel like a risk to the safety of all three of them; that he has understood for some time that Will is an alcoholic, and that something will have to be done to at least rein in his drinking eventually, but that now is not the time because out of all of Will's maladaptive coping mechanisms, this is the one least likely to cause himself or others immediate and dramatic harm.

So instead he says, "Life has been difficult for him lately."

Will, whose acquisition of the language has been so slow that he probably understood three words of this exchange at most, smiles at them both with curiosity before raising his glass.

"Mr. Javok is wise to the fact that you are my boyfriend," Hannibal tells him.

Will pauses for a moment, and summoning almost the entirety of his lexicon, says, "*Khorosho*."

It is obvious to Will and Hannibal both that they are too noticeable as foreigners to go under the radar effectively - especially Will - and so since their arrival in Minsk they have opted instead to hide in plain sight, relying on the impression that they have nothing to hide to protect them.

They sensed little danger when the old man in the flat next door began to show a friendly interests in them - in Hannibal in particular - though they are acutely aware that the danger of exposure is ever present. Mass media is a global enterprise, and their daring escape with all its sordid - largely invented - details has been an object of fascination for many. They know that it's not impossible that this media blitz might at some point make its way into Mr. Javok's orbit, but so far things have been okay.

Mr. Javok is single and a semi-retired scholar. He has a greenhouse in the courtyard that produces tomatoes even in the winter, which he distributes to the other residents with great pleasure. Several times now he has brought them the fruits of his labor; bite-sized sweet yellow tomatoes that are shaped like pears and bright red ones the size of a man's fist, along with many other herbs and vegetables and treats. Afterwards, he sits in the front room and visits. He is helping them with their Russian - Hannibal's is nearly three decades stale and of another dialect, while Will's is utterly hopeless.

Will has speculated on the possibility that he may be queer, and that his interests in them is informed by his own ability to clock them as being the same, and Hannibal is inclined to agree. This is not, however, a question that one just comes out and asks a 72 year old man who has lived the majority of his life in Eastern Europe.

"Making friends everywhere you go," Will told him, after one of Mr. Javok's early visits. Hannibal had by then told him a great deal about the young men in the prison. It's easy for Will to imagine himself becoming dependent upon Hannibal the way that they did, had he been in their place. "You are charming, Hannibal, when you let yourself be."

"I like him. He reminds me a little of my father," Hannibal said. After a beat he added, "We might be toying with his life," and Will's silence was affirmation of the risk. If it came down to Mr. Javok's life or their own safety and freedom, they both knew perfectly well what choice they would make.

A few days after that, Hannibal came home to find Will industriously filling a row of small syringes with a clear fluid.

Hannibal took in the scene, thinking about Matthew's needle, and of the sting that he'd felt in his own flesh that night in Will's kitchen. "What are you doing?" he asked, but with little anxiety.

"Making you a present," Will said, recapping the last syringe. There were eight total.

He looked up from his work to meet Hannibal's dubiously curious expression. "These aren't very strong," he explained. "They won't kill anyone you use them on - it's very unlikely, anyway - but they'll slow down someone who is big and knock out anyone who isn't. It gives us options if something unfortunate happens.

"Say, for example, dear old Mr. Javok happens to catch your face from a new angle, and suddenly he remembers seeing your mugshot on a news report months ago, and it all clicks in place and he *just knows*. We can knock him out and stow him someplace safe where he'll be found in a few hours, hardly the worse for wear, while we avail ourselves of a nice head start.

"And," he adds, "if it's some bounty hunter or lone investigator, these give us a whole set of options about what to do before we roll out."

"Risky to drug elderly people. I wouldn't think you've done it very often."

"No," Will allows. "I don't have a lot of experience in that regard. But I'm good at this."

They hid the syringes in convenient locations around the apartment.

Now, Hannibal brings dinner to the table. A fresh salad and carrots stewed with apples for a start. Fish fillets baked with mushrooms and Mr. Javok's tomatoes, served with boiled potatoes and lightly salted cucumbers, the latter also drawn from the bounty of Mr. Javok's little greenhouse. Honey cakes cool on the counter, waiting for dessert.

Hannibal puts the oven mitts on counter. “*Priyatnogo appyetita*,” he says, and joins Will and Mr. Javok at the table.

Chapter End Notes

Hope this one wasn't too dull.

It felt important to me that they aren't entirely isolated - that Hannibal, especially, is able to form other friendships, even if they are transitory - and couldn't resist the chance to bring Mr. Javok from HANNIBAL RISING back to life.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will rifles through the medicine cabinet with jittery hands. The empty aspirin bottle lays discarded on its side in the sink. He doesn't find what he's looking for, and he curses and closes the cabinet door hard enough to make the glass mirror shake.

When he glances into that mirror, he sees that his face is smeared bright crimson with clotting blood. Blood rings his mouth and drips down his chin.

“Nope,” he says to his reflection. The mouth does not move in time with his words. “Fuck you.”

He turns away from the mirror in disgust and goes looking for Hannibal.

He’s at the kitchen sink, washing up from a solidarity breakfast. Will supposes that he must have slept through it.

“Why don't we have any aspirin?”

“I bought a hundred count bottle barely two weeks ago, and I haven't taken any,” Hannibal answers. He dries his hands and turns, and his eyes have an uneasy, suspicious cast. “How many have you been taking?”

“Oh, never mind,” Will says, and turns and goes back into the bedroom.

Hannibal follows after him.

In the thirty seconds that he’s been out of Hannibal’s line of sight he’s found a bottle. He brings the rim to his mouth and tips it back, gulping a swig of vodka.

He runs the back of his hand across his lips, and then says, “Don’t look at me like that. It's just a hair of the dog that bit me.”

“This needs to stop.”

“I know it,” Will says, and for an instant Hannibal almost believes that he is making a meaningful concession. Then he says, “The vodka’s the problem. Damned potato juice smells like rubbing alcohol and tastes like nothing good, and it leaves me hung over as hell. I ought to just splurge on some good whiskey.”

And Hannibal, who knows perfectly well that Will has never bulked at the expense when it comes to his poison of choice, and has in no way cut corners on any of his other preferred luxuries - now or ever before - recognizes the pretext for what it is, even if Will does not.

Things have been getting worse for a while now.

Will has made his best effort at being a good sport about the situation, but Hannibal knows that Minsk does not agree with him, and the deeper the winter freeze sinks into the city the more miserable he has become.

“I wasn’t bred for this,” he’d told Hannibal, just the night before, as he fiddled with the thermostat. Giving up on drawing anymore heat from the furnace, he went back to the couch and his pile of blankets, cocooning himself among them with glass and a bottle.

Then he’d taken out his phone to look at it and exclaimed, “Twenty-one below Celsius! This is inhuman, Hannibal. How did people live like this before central heating - shit, how do they live like this now?”

The grousing was calculated to amuse, but Hannibal is aware that there is a real weariness just below its surface. Will has felt chronically unwell since they got here, Hannibal knows perfectly well, but he has been trying to keep this to himself because he believes that this ought to be able Hannibal’s time to heal.

The real decline began about a week ago, when Will slipped on the ice while they were walking home from the shops. He’d fallen flat on his back and cracked the back of his head against the sidewalk with a sound that was loud enough to make visions of fractured skulls run behind Hannibal’s eyes.

He’d laid there, surrounded by nearly a foot of snow, blinking slowly, a mystified sort of frustration hazy on his features.

When Hannibal crouched beside him and asked, “Are you alright?” Will tried to speak - it seemed to Hannibal there was something cutting and sardonic glittering in his eyes - but when he opened his mouth blood welled out between his lips.

He turned over, shakily, pulling himself up onto his hands and knees, and spit crimson into the dirty snow. He said something, but his words were so garbled that it took Hannibal a second to work out what it was.

“Jesus,” Will said, and spit again. “Bit my tongue. Fuck, that *hurts*.”

They'd gotten back to the apartment, though it took a while, and Will rinsed his mouth out with salt water and crawled miserably into bed. Hannibal watched him carefully for a long time after that, concerned at the possibility of a concussion, but aside from some initial dizziness his head seemed no worse for wear.

But he hasn’t left the apartment since then. It was his tongue that he complained about at first, and back pain, but as the days have gone by he’s largely stopped making excuses and has opted instead to spend most of his time stewing in his own misery.

Now, Hannibal says, “You’ve confused the chain of causality.”

Will sighs elaborately. “And what do you mean by that?”

“You don’t feel miserable because you are drinking something that doesn't agree with you. You are drinking because something else is wrong, and you don’t want to face up to that.”

The edges of Will's smile are as sharp as broken glass. "I'm drinking," he tells Hannibal, "because I am a drunk.

"What can I tell you, Hannibal? You've married - so to speak - an alcoholic. Tragic mistake, that; my mother had the same problem.

"Incidentally," he goes on, "and despite what Freddie Lounds may insist, it's her that you remind me of, far more than my father. So who does that make me in this little equation?"

"Are we back to threats, then?"

Will blinks. He shakes his head as though to clear it, and the gesture is both violent and muddled, and only then seems to make the connection.

He looks stricken.

"No, Hannibal. Jesus. I didn't - I didn't think. I'm dumping on myself because I feel like shit, that's all. I didn't mean anything else."

"What's going on, Will? What's wrong with you?"

Will laughs, trying to make a joke of it, but bitter panic sparkles in his eyes. "Well, I kill people. And I eat them. That's two things right there. Do you want the complete list?"

"You know what I mean."

"I'm fine, Hannibal. Don't worry about it."

"I'm going for a walk."

"Can you get some aspirin? It's just that I've got a headache and -"

Hannibal closes the front door on his voice.

Will is reaching up into the cupboard for a glass into which to pour some milk when he sees the creature behind him, reflected in the sink's shinning metal surface.

It is white as a sheet - white as cotton, white as the robes he'd found in the back of his father's closet after he was dead, white as a roaring avalanche just before it buries everything alive beneath itself - and it looms over him, at once giantanic and wasted, devoid of any spare flesh in the same way that Hannibal had been not so long ago. Its head is crowned with sharp-tipped antlers of such a brilliant white that their reflected glare makes his eyes burn. It is nearly twice Will's own height, and crouches to keep from catching those antlers on the ceiling tiles.

Will reaches for the milk bottle. He takes the heavy glass container by the neck and spins around to fling it at the creature, and before he hears the sound of shattering glass he has already turned back to the sink and grabbed a knife from the dish drainer and he wheels back to face the creature, terror spurring on his desire to fight, and -

And of course there is nothing there. Just the broken milk bottle, lying in shards beneath a sizeable dent in the wall where it had struck.

Will is shaking all over as he reaches backwards and lets the knife fall into the sink.

His voice is full of despair when he says to the empty kitchen, “Oh Christ. I’m just sick as hell.”

Chapter End Notes

... I couldn't resist the Llamas with Hats reference. I just wasn't strong enough.

There is PROBABLY one more story in this series, though I may end up combining it with this one to make it considerably longer.

I've also received a GLORIOUS story prompt for an anon on tumblr. What was requested was an AU version of my HUNGRY GHOST AU (the one where Hannibal buys a secluded house for Murder Reasons and discovers that it is haunted by Will's ghost) but with this AU's Will and Hannibal instead. I'm hoping to start that one as soon as I wrap this story up, and am very excited about all the different places the story might go.

Chapter 13

Hannibal supposes that he ought to get the aspirin and go home, but he feels spiteful and frustrated and in absolutely no hurry to return home for another round with Will.

So he walks instead, and by and by he finds himself in the city center, standing at the edge of Minsk's Victory Square. He had meant to come here with Will, had wanted to show the Victory Monument to Will and to see it the first time for himself.

Instead, he walks alone to the granite and bronze pillar, and is surprised as he comes closer how little the thing grows. Snow blankets the parts of the monument that are too high to brush clean by hand.

He circles the monument, inspecting the bronze reliefs that grace the four facets of the pedestal. He studies the faces of the Parisians and soldiers, caste in metal, forever staring off towards a brighter future won through their sacrifice.

His Russian has come back to him quickly, and it is easy for him to translate the inscriptions. "Soviet Army during the Great Patriotic War," one of the reliefs is labeled. Another side of the pedestal says, "Belarusian Partisans." Hannibal continues around the monument and reads, "Honor to Heroes Who Gave Their Lives for Liberation." The final side is imprinted simply with the date "May 9, 1945."

It is disappointing, somehow. The Victory Monument is not as large as he imagined it to be, and the dirty gray shade of the granite strikes him as unfortunate. The reliefs feel melodramatic, all those handsome and certain faces, a particularly mawkishly bad example of Socialist Realism.

It all makes him feel bitter, and that was not the emotion he expected this visit to elicit, though in retrospect he supposes he is not surprised.

The past weighs heavy on him here, in this city, and he is at least as eager to be gone as Will is. The Lithuanian border is only a two hour drive away; going back to what passes as his home would only be a matter of an afternoon's trip. Will has suggested doing just that, but Hannibal has no desire to do so.

He looks up at the pillar, and feels it to be a banal commemoration to events and forces that continue to influence his own life.

He wonders how different everything might have been, had history unfolded itself in some other way. Hannibal thinks about his uncle Robert, dead with a Nazi bullet in his skull two decades before Hannibal was even born, but whom his father so often said had shared much in common with Hannibal. The same given name now graces the false ID and passport in Hannibal's pocket.

He thinks about the old Nazis and their younger protege who were trapped in the cabin with himself and Mischa. Do they have any idea, he wonders, how thoroughly they ruined the lion's share of his life? That it is only now, four decades later, that he has begun to see the possibility for real happiness and something approaching recovery, and even still the love that he has found with Will is often fraught by conflict and misunderstanding?

Hannibal has imagined the possibility that when confronted Grutas may tell him that he ought to be grateful, that the only reason Hannibal is alive now is because Grutas did the hard thing that allowed them all to live - all, save one.

That possibility frightens Hannibal, but he is going to see the old man regardless. Next week.

In his mind's eye, the shape of the Grutas' face in the shadows of the claustrophobic cabin takes form. He wonders if the old man has children - grandchildren or maybe great grandchildren, even. Did he kiss his daughters with the same mouth that worried the flesh away from a little girl's bones?

The thought, which is more a memory that has suddenly unburied itself, sets his heart running faster than it ought to. It is not a memory that he wishes to be alone with, much less in the lonesome cold of a strange city during the icy twilight, and he turns back towards home, contemplating as he goes the wisdom and necessity of unburdening himself of the memory by speaking it out loud to Will and seeking from him comfort.

In the usual course of things, Hannibal expressing a need for his help would be enough to cause Will to put aside all else to focus on aiding Hannibal, and Hannibal has no doubt that Will would try to do just that if asked now… but Hannibal is hesitant to put more weight on a man who is already floundering, no matter how much Will insists that being allowed to help Hannibal helps him, too.

Mr. Javok's opens his door as Hannibal is coming up the steps.

"Robert," he says, as this is the name Hannibal has given him. Will has chosen the name "Glenn" for his own forged documents and for their conversations with others, though as far as Hannibal is aware the name has no special significance. "Come here."

Hannibal does, meeting him just on the other side of the door frame. The old man's rooms are a clutter of books and thriving houseplants, all brightly lit from the light pouring in through the windows, and the space smells pleasantly of dust and growing green things. Hannibal see a mezuzah hanging on the doorpost, and thinks briefly of Bev.

"Something is wrong in your flat, with Glenn," he tells Hannibal. He speaks English now, Hannibal understands, because he does not wish to be misunderstood and because he wishes to thwart any unwelcome listeners. "I heard things breaking, maybe two hours ago, and then he was shouting. I thought maybe I go and check, but…"

"You made the right choice," Hannibal says, anxiety sparking and shooting off in multiple directions like a firework. "It's better to leave him alone when he gets like that," he goes on, though Will has never, to his knowledge, behaved in anything approaching the way that Mr. Javok is describing. Lies come easy, especially when embedded in the truth. "He has a temper. And he hasn't been well."

Hannibal wants go, but he pauses a beat before he asks the next question, striving to seem casual. "You didn't call the landlord about it? Or the police?"

Mr. Javok gives him an offended look. “Who do you take me for? No, I did not. But you two need to be careful. If the police realize about you they will find a pretext to detain you. Prisons here are not kind places.”

“I understand,” Hannibal says. “Thank you.”

He moves to go, but Mr. Javok catches him by the wrist. “Are you safe going in there alone, Robert? He does not beat you?”

The question blindsides Hannibal. “Certainly not,” he says, and pushes back on the tangle of emotions that the question has evoked in him; there will be time later, hopefully, to tease apart why being asked such a thing makes him feel at once so guilty and so powerfully moved.

Because Mr. Javok doesn’t seem convinced, he adds, “I think he’d rather cut off his own hand than strike me,” and the scars on his own knuckles burn like shame.

“All right,” Mr. Javok says. “I didn’t think so, but it was important to ask.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal says, not sure if he means it. Anger is beginning to cloud his initial astonishment. “I need to go check on him.”

“Of course,” the old man says, and releases him. “You will tell me if you need anything, yes?”

Hannibal knows that it is not a rational way to feel, but when he sees the broken milk jug on the floor, his first response is outrage at the waste of wholesome food. The spilled milk has begun to sour, and the smell is deeply unpleasant, and for a moment Hannibal is far more angry about this situation than he was at Will’s sniping earlier this morning.

He bites that down, recognizing that it is a distraction from more serious concerns, and goes looking for Will.

Hannibal finds Will asleep in the bedroom, and he doesn’t smell great, either; his skin is coated in a layer of anxious sweat, as are the sheets beneath him, and that strange element of heat and burnt sugar is so overpowering that Hannibal wonders how he could have ever imagined it to be pleasant.

He sits in the chair beside the bed and watches Will as he sleeps, fitful and uneasy. It is obvious that whatever is wrong with Will now is distinct from his usual host of jagged places and fault lines, Hannibal no longer doubts.

The question is what to do about it.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovely gift art from Electrarhodes to go with the second story in this series. <3

When Will wakes he finds Hannibal sleeping in the chair next to the bed. His chin is resting against his chest and there's a tiny fold of loose skin just under his neck, bunched up below his jaw, and Will's eyes take in that scrap of softness and vulnerability and he feels like there is not enough room in his chest to accommodate the swelling of his heart.

Hannibal feels eyes watching him, and his head rolls on his neck and his eyes turn up to Will, tired but determined, and Will thinks that there is nothing that he wouldn't to make things easier for

Hannibal, and he curses his body and himself.

But what he says is, “You’re a such a cute old man. I might keep you around but I haven’t decided yet.”

“Will,” Hannibal says, and there is such a weight of feeling in the word that Will wonders if it might cause his own chest to cave in.

“I think, um,” Will tells him, “that I might be sick again.”

“Encephalitis.”

Will worries his lower lip between his teeth. There is a small tang of blood, and he winces at the taste and says, “I’m scared. I was scared to admit it. I don’t want to go through this again, and I thought if I just refused to acknowledge it then it might…”

“... go away?” The irrationality of this fills Hannibal with frustration. “If you are sick then you’re sick. How could you possibly think that you could ignore this, when last time you did that you told me that you almost died?”

“I don’t want to be a burden,” Will says, and hears his voice go cajoling and nervous. “And we were having such a good time.”

“I thought that you were getting better,” Hannibal says, and his face is tight with control, but Will can see how much he is holding back - how absolutely livid he is now.

He knows that Hannibal isn’t talking about the encephalitis. “I am,” he insists. “I will. I’m trying. I just don’t -”

Hannibal cuts him off with a sigh. “What are we going to do?”

Will reads down his list.

“Methylprednisolone. That’s a steroid. It decreases the immune system's response, which should, um, reduce swelling of the brain.” He swallows, his anxiety tactile enough to choke on. “It’s marketed as Medrol.

“The immunoglobulin goes under a lot of different brand names, and none of them are exactly the same. Not Pangloulin, is the thing, I responded poorly to that brand last time. Cytogam would be ideal, but any others will probably be fine. We’re going to have to do at least two five day cycles with the IVIG - that’s the intravenous immunoglobulin therapy - so just get as much as you can.

“I’ll need oral prednisolone eventually. Rituximab is sometimes used as a second line treatment, but I didn’t need it last time around, and we’ve caught this a lot sooner this time. Those aren’t high priority right now.”

“Intravenous fluids and an IV rig. Those aren’t prescription only - at least they weren’t in the states. You can probably just get the at a medical supply store. A stethoscope. We should, um, keep an eye on my heart, it can sometimes be affected.”

He tries to force a smile. “Though the way my heart likes to run wild, how would we even know the difference?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer. Will hands him the paper, and sees the way it jitters in his hand. He watches Hannibal read down the list.

“I can get all this.”

“Are you sure?”

“I used to be a cop, Will. I know how.”

He looks up from the list. “Quetiapine. Chilton tried to put me on that. He said that it was for bipolar disorder.”

“It’s a general antipsychotic. You aren’t bipolar, by the way.”

“Someday are you going to tell me what I have?”

Will doesn’t answer him. “Fluoxetine would probably work as well as quetiapine. If the hallucinations get worse, or if my mood is off…”

“‘If your mood is off,’” Hannibal repeats. “How would we even know the difference?”

His effort at a smile seems stronger this time, but not by much. “If I’m violent, Hannibal, towards you or myself, give me an antipsychotic and keep me on it until I’m well again. I won’t respond well - don’t expect me to be able to hold two thoughts together, let alone be an interesting conversationalist - but I’d rather be doped to the gills than risk hurting you.

“Use your discretion.” He sees Hannibal weighing that and coming up with a different total than Will, but knows that there's little he can do about that.

“You understand… the recovery time on this is bad,” Will goes on, and he hates the uncertainty in his voice. “Maybe things will improve within a few days, but it might get worse before it gets better. And it could be half a year until I’m really well again…”

“I’m not going anywhere, Will. Stop worrying about that.”

Will's expression is pained; he blinks back tears. “I don’t deserve this.”

Hannibal’s tone is matter-of-fact. “You have me, nonetheless.”

Chapter End Notes

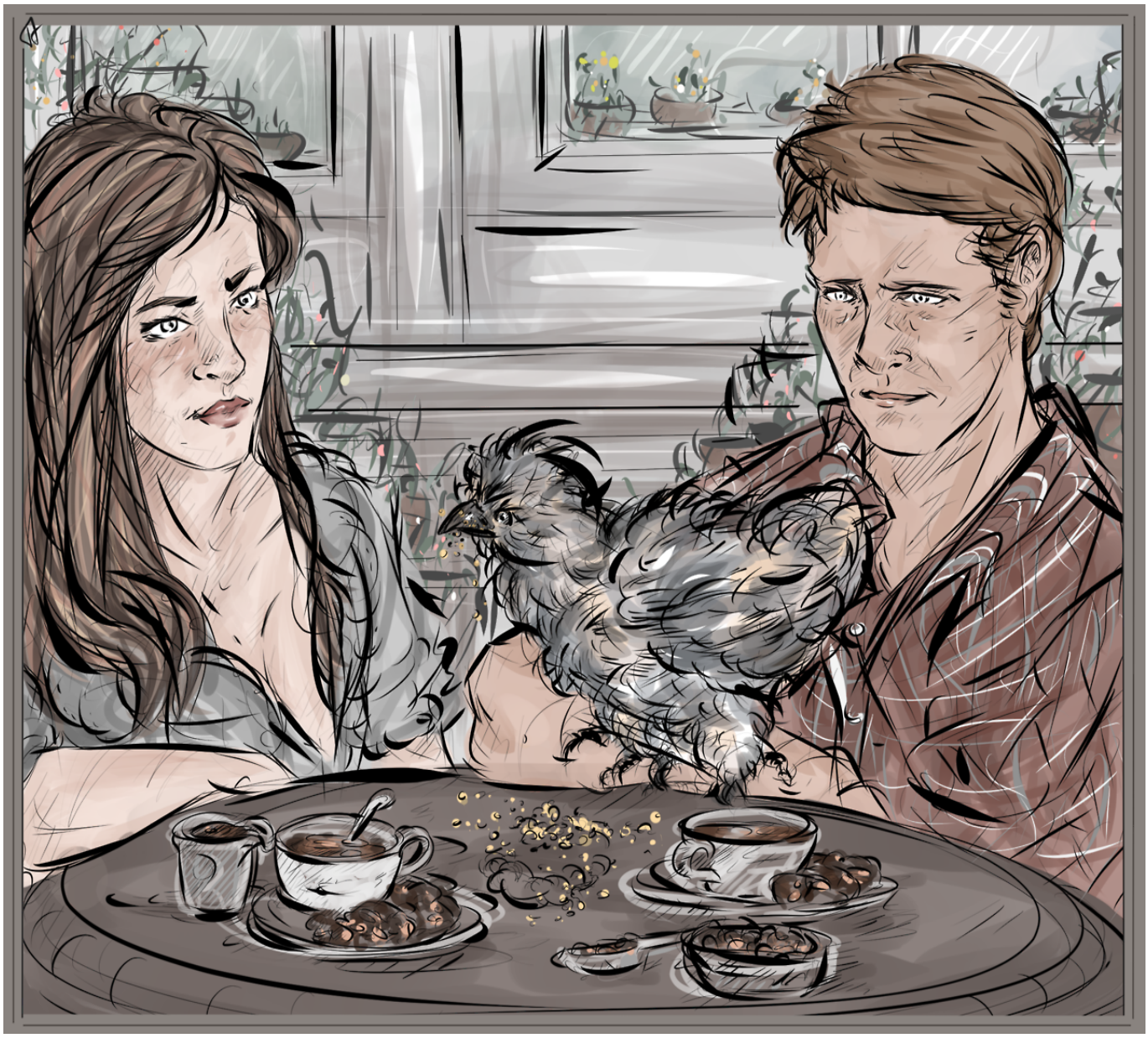
I have another one after this already finished, but I am trying to have self-control and wait a day or two to post it... :)

FYI, I'm on tumblr

here.

I post a fair amount of extra content for this series there - moodboards, meta, chapter previews, etc. I also Yell about a lot of different things. Drop by if you have a chance <3.

Chapter 15



Some adorable art of Margot, Hannibal, and his terrible runty weirdo son, by Toni.

“We might go hunting, when you are better,” Hannibal says, a couple of days after they begin the treatment.

Will feels something in his chest rise eagerly at the idea, and then fall when Hannibal continues, “Nearly half of this country is still ancient forest. I looked online and it’s easy to book a guide - European bison, elk so large I thought at first glance that they were moose.

“Wild boar.” He pauses, clearly expecting Will to take interest in that last. “They hire out dogs with which to run wild hare. Wolves…”

Will feels himself getting angrier than he wants to be. He wonders what he has done wrong, that Hannibal is under the impression that he is interested in killing anything that he couldn’t eat afterwards.

“Maybe,” he says, but even the idea of venturing out into the forest feels far too daunting. He can hardly imagine what it would be like to have that kind of energy again.

“You had some hunting of your own that you're meant to be doing - soon, I think,” Will tells him. “Don’t let me keep you from that.”

“I’ve got other things to focus on right now,” Hannibal tells him. “It will wait.”

Will understands himself to be a poor patient.

He is trying to avoid being troublesome, but he can’t seem to stand to stay in bed.

Sometimes, he forgets what he is supposed to be doing - which is, primarily, resting - and he wanders off, looking for some task which he will, inevitably, leave incomplete.

Mr. Javok has come over to sit with him a couple of times, but strange thoughts have taken to finding their way up Will throat and out through his mouth, words that make little sense even to himself, and he is unable to censor this.

He imagines words that will condemn himself and Hannibal, or else damn Mr. Javok to death, pouring out of him like hemorrhaging blood.

It’s too dangerous, and they stop inviting Mr. Javok in.

The puppy, when Hannibal brings it home, is good for Will at first, but very quickly he becomes obsessed with it in a way that concerns Hannibal deeply. He ought to, Hannibal believes, be focusing on his own health, but even as he continues to pretend to feel dubious about the little mutt he obsesses over the idea that it might be unwell.

Hannibal is pleased that Will loves the dog, but what is happening now is a reflection of displaced anxiety - and, he fears, worse things - rather than love.

“He’s not sick,” Hannibal tells him.

“I don’t want him to die. I’m worn out with losing things and I don’t want him to die.”

Hannibal catalogues the list of things that Will has lost: his home, his career, his patients, the dogs that he raised himself - even Beth, the one that he gave specially to Hannibal. Even the damned yard chickens are gone.

It’s very unlikely that he will ever be able to go home to Louisiana - it is safe, in fact, to assume that he is permanently exiled for the United States. If either of them go back there again it is likely to be in chains.
Will’s access to his best friend and his son has been severely limited.

And, Hannibal knows, Will is still reeling from having lost him once, and the knowledge that it might happen again at any time is like a millstone around his neck.

He says again, “But Will, he’s not sick. I took him to the vet’s just yesterday and they said everything was fine. Remember? That’s the second vet this week and they said not to worry.”

Will is quiet for perhaps half an hour, but Hannibal knows that he is not resting. He is watching the puppy’s breathing as Winston sleeps on his lap, and Hannibal can feel the terror and desperation rolling off him in waves.

“He is sick, though,” he insists. “This is different from last time. He isn’t breathing right.”

“He’s fine,” Hannibal says. “Nothing has changed.”

“You don’t know. You’ve never had a small puppy before, so you don’t know. You don’t know how fragile they are.”

“Will -” he begins, but stops himself. He want to say that this is not rational, that it is perhaps evidence that there is still something very wrong with him, and that Hannibal is more worried about that than the animal.

Instead, he watches the sleeping puppy and a faint sense of unease comes upon him.

Will rubs Winston’s back to wake him, and the puppy raises his head and begins to pant.

“See?”

“They pant when they are happy,” Hannibal counters, though not with much confidence. “Or because they’re hot. It's too hot in here.”

“He needs to go to the vet’s. A different one this time - the last one was a hack.”

“The last one was the best animal hospital in Minsk.”

“Look at the way he's breathing,” Will says again. “He's in pain. The wound...”

“He doesn’t have a wound, Will. He's fine.”

“It’s infected,” Will insists. “Even I can smell it.”

Hannibal tries to ground him. “Will, what is this dog's name?”

“Winston,” he says, after a pause, but before he spoke Hannibal saw his mouth make the shape that would have proceeded the word “Beth.” Then he adds, in free association, “‘Taste good like a cigarette should.’”

Hannibal recognizes the old ad slogan, and he tries to make a joke of it. “Please don't eat the dog.”

Will looks hurt - he looks near to tears, actually. “I would never -”

“I know. I know, Will, it's alright. Where are we?”

“Beneath the veil. Behind the Iron Curtain.”

“Mm-hmm. Okay. What year did *perestroika* begin?” When Will looks blank, Hannibal reconsiders the question; possibly even with his full faculties Will would be confused by it. “Never mind. When did the Berlin Wall come down?”

That one is easy. “November 9th, ‘89. My daddy threw a party. That was about two months before I killed him.”

He breaks, briefly, into song. “... Been looking for freedom...”

It is, Hannibal reflects, at least something of a relief that Will is being almost silly now, though David Hasselhoff songs are almost too much to bear. Will is lucid, most of the time, but there have been periods of confusion and agitation. When he is coherent at all, during these episodes, he is often extremely morbid.

Will claims, and all of the articles Hannibal has read in online medical journals agree, that these intermittent symptoms are more or less to be expected, but they make him uneasy regardless. Will is confusing enough - to himself and to Hannibal - when in his right mind. Attempting to follow the convoluted emotional trails and the sideways leaps of logic which Will's mind takes now isn't entirely without its appeal, but Hannibal's limited pleasure at the challenge makes him feel uneasy about himself.

“What year is it now?”

“I'm not an idiot,” Will grouses. “It's 2017.”

“Okay, good. So what do those two facts mean when taken together?”

Will won't be distracted by world history.

“This dog is really sick, Hannibal.

“Listen to me. If you don’t take him then I’ll go myself” Will begins to get out of the bed. The puppy whimpers when Will picks him up, and the sound indeed strikes Hannibal as one of pain.

“Lay back down,” he tells Will, frowning. “I’ll take him in.”

It is as though Hannibal never spoke. He sees Will spiralling towards hysteria. “I don’t know what I’ll do if he dies. I'm so worn out with losing things,” he says again.

“I’ll take him,” Hannibal repeats. “Right now. You just stay in bed.”

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Heads up, friends: This chapter and the one following it include some very graphic depictions of violence. Please go carefully.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will decides, almost as soon as Hannibal has gone, that he is really not all that sick after all.

He wants to catch up with Hannibal so he can go with him to take Beth to her recheck appointment. The Dragon had sharp teeth, and they were poisonous, and he needs to make sure that the wound is healing.

As soon as he is outside he realizes that he has no clear idea of which way Hannibal was going or what his destination might be, and then he furrows his brow because he can't quite remember where he meant to go, either.

That worries him, not knowing where Hannibal is. What if they've caught him? What if he's starving all over again in some cell, or in some ugly cabin under a mountain of snow? Will hates the snow so much, the ice and the cold and all of the associated bullshit, and he is shivering because he doesn't have his coat, but instead of going back inside he starts down the street, though he isn't sure where he is headed.

Hannibal is hungry.

Yes. That's it. Hannibal is hungry, and he can't eat the same things Will eats. He gets sick. It upsets him.

Will needs to go and get something to make Hannibal dinner, so he'll be okay. So he won't be angry with Will for the bad thing (things?) he's doing (did?).

But the dead find Will at the market place.

The first woman that he ever killed is wanting for him behind the counter at the bakery.

That was a mistake, he'd realized almost immediately, but by then it had been too late to back out. There had been little enjoyment in it for him; he'd felt like a bully, like a petty and pathetic male pig, (like his father), and he hadn't made it last very long.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to cut her - not while she was still alive - so he'd smothered her instead, cupping his palm over her mouth and pinching her nostrils shut, and when her body bucked against the restraints he did not allow himself the cowardice of looking away, though back then he was not always immune to the way that their own frantic terror could get under his skin, and so his own heart raced unsteadily as he shushed her and stroked her forearm gently with his other hand, wanting there to be some tiny comfort in that for her though he knew perfectly well that

if she was sensitive to it at all it would feel like only another violation, and he watched the way her eyes bulged and teared from the pressure building up behind them, making her mascara run.

When she looks at him now from across the counter, pale and cold and dead, it is with the same baffled and desperate hurt, and he sees that the mascara has dried on her face, running from her eyes like spider legs and meeting with the thin trickle of blood that drips from one nostril.

The blood drips down onto the paper in which she has wrapped the bread when she hands it to him, and he hurries outside, fighting the urge to look back over his shoulder.

He knows that it isn't real, but that makes no difference, and when he sees the second one he forgets even this much.

Most of them were good, but killing that woman had been bad. It had been so bad and shook him up so deeply that he'd considered stopping - had considered for the first time if it was possible to stop.

But a few weeks after that he'd gotten a big man to come out to a quiet lonesome place with him. He was a football player on a decent college team with a promising future and a not-so-secret predilection for date rape, and he certainly hadn't been very bright because he had sincerely believed that a psychology undergrad could get him anabolic steroids.

It was a wonder, too, why he thought he needed them; he was 6'6" and well over two hundred and fifty pounds, and once things got rolling Will worried that he might manage to break the restraints. He hadn't had the basement in those days - had to make do - but in the end there wasn't any problem.

That time had been better. It had, in fact, it left Will feeling so relieved that he'd felt downright cheerful, and there'd been an easy bounce to his step as he built the fire and lashed together the drying racks.

They'd had a nice conversation, though the football player dominated the discussion, but whenever he stopped shouting for help or roaring out threats or pleading to be let go long enough to catch his breath, and in the moments where the horror of what Will was getting ready to do seized his vocal cords, Will spoke into the silence, letting him know exactly what to expect.

He yelled louder when Will tightened the tourniquet below his elbow than he did when Will used the knife to slice off that first long, thin, strip of meat. That made Will curious, and he asked the football player rapist if he so feared the tourniquet because it was the final indicator before the blade broke skin that this was all really very real or because he had taken solace in the idea that he might at least be allowed to bleed out quickly.

Will supposed that it was the first but assured him nonetheless that the second would not be the case. "You're stuck with me for a while, I'm afraid," Will told him, and the man had somehow found it in him to take up the screaming again.

When the first batch of jerky was dry, Will took a piece for the drying rack and chewed, but it wasn't very good. "There's so much testosterone in this that it's almost as bad as boar taint, but at least the dogs won't know any better - they aren't picky eaters when it comes to trail food." The football player rapist hadn't really seemed to parse any of that - he was, by then, considerably reduced in size and quite vacant in the eyes - but it hadn't really mattered.

That had all been fine - better than fine. It had been an all night affair that lasted well into the light of the next day, and it cemented for Will the idea that he was on the right path - that this was what would keep him stable and functional and at least able to pass as more or less well - but that he simply needed to be more careful about who he picked in the future.

Will hadn't feared the man - not after he had him bound and helpless, in any case - but seeing him here and now on the street corner, nearly whole again and waiting for the light to change, absolutely terrifies him.

He hurries past, wondering why the others don't see the blood or notice the way that his throwing arm has been flayed down to the bone, and he is certain that the dead man will raise his voice in accusation but none of these things happen.

Will rushes on, not quite daring to run for fear of attracting notice and too lightheaded, in any case, to manage it, and now there are more. The dead are on every street corner, lounging on benches and smoking outside of cafes.

It comes to Will that his father might be close - that the old man might be coming for him - and that terror is bone deep but it brings with it too a bolt of vicious anticipation, as he sees himself spitting in his father's face, telling him that he is *glad* of what he did, he is happy with himself and who he has become, and that he would do it all over again

But instead, it is that Matthew emerges from the shadows of an alley and begins to follow him.

He smells strongly of rot - of putrefaction and of waste - and Will wants to run, but he knows that Matthew is faster than him on account of being dead. The dead have come into their power and Matthew can be anywhere Matthew wants to be. Will is weak and shivering and out of breath, and he knows that he will not win if Matthew decides to hurt him.

Hannibal will help me, Will thinks, and he hurries home, the fall of his old friend's footsteps never far behind.

But when he goes into their building and unlocks the door, Will finds that strangely it leads not into their flat but down into his old basement.

He descends the steps with the knowledge that Hannibal waits for him below.

Chapter End Notes

I'm pretty nervous about this chapter and the impact it may have on the willingness of readers to find Will sympathetic (not to mention to like, idk, like me as a person/writer, lol >_<) but I felt like it would be dishonest to shy away from the things that he's done or the ways that they made him feel, you know?

Anyway, thanks for reading, and as always feedback is super welcomed.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will approaches the stainless steel table on which Hannibal is bound with the fascinated trepidation of a condemned man walking towards the execution chamber.

The feeling of helplessness is huge in Will - Hannibal's helplessness, and his own.

It is, he understands, Hannibal's fault that these ghosts have escaped. He does not see Will; he refuses to understand that, at his core, Will is a monster - only and exclusively. Hannibal thinks that there is good in him, that he is someone who Hannibal can save. He imagines that Will is a worthy object of his love - and that he is capable of reciprocating it.

It is all lies.

They are lies, but Will had almost come to believe them before the dead came calling. He'd wanted to believe that if he allowed Hannibal to open him up that he would be able to find someway to be whole, if only exclusively with Hannibal, that it could be safe to allow someone else not only to understand but to accept him, and he had almost allowed that empty hope to change him.

No more.

He goes to Hannibal. He is bound, ankles and wrists, by leather cuffs. Will lifts one of Hannibal's hands, turning it over speculatively, and Hannibal tries to shift his grasp to hold Will's hand in his own, because, Will knows, he really does believe that they love one another, the sick old fool.

The bitterness of that is like to choke Will. It could leave him sobbing on the floor like a beaten child if he let it, and he thinks now of the beating that Hannibal gave him, of the way Hannibal's hands broke his nose and his teeth and how his skin torn and of the twisted tangle of scar tissue that has been left behind and that will mark him for the rest of his life as someone who was soft and foolish enough to give someone else the opportunity to use his hands on him like that, like his father had used his hands on his mother.

Instead of holding Hannibal's hand, Will catches him by the fingers and wrenches them back to their bent limit.

There's a tray of tools next to the table. Hannibal's respiration picks up when Will raises the pruning shears and positions their blades around the first joint of his index finger, and Will watches the rise and fall of his chest avidly, yet Hannibal gives almost no response when Will tightens the shears to nip off the top half of one of those agile and powerful fingers.

Will does it again, and again and again, yet now Hannibal does not even give him the benefit of mild hyperventilation; the only fear in him had been that of betrayal - the anticipation of betrayal - and now that this bitter draught has been drunk he turns his face away from Will in disgusted resignation and refuses to grant him anything else.

"Talk to me," Will says, circling around to the other hand. Tears sting at his eyes but Hannibal's own face is dry and impassive. *Beg me,* he means. *Beg me not to do what we both know I'm going*

to do regardless. Give me total control over you and over the way you regard me.

See me how I want you to see me.

Will cannot be what he needs to be without the benefit of external validation; he cannot fight back the terror without someone else confirming for him that he is the most terrifying thing of all.

But Hannibal won't. Hannibal is so damn stubborn, and the anger mounts Will, the helplessness and the rage and the fear of being nothing - of being *less than* nothing, a series of empty masks, a gaping hollow - is entirely in control, and he picks up a hunting knife and yanks the blade across Hannibal's throat and even then Hannibal will not give Will the validation that he craves.

There is no fear in Hannibal at all, and the pain is something that he keeps so closely in check that it hardly shows on his face. But there is disappointment now, and a unsurprised sadness that cuts Will down to the bone, and he feels as small and petty and weak as he ever has, because when Hannibal finally relents and turns his eyes towards him Will sees that if he were only to free him now Hannibal would rise up with the last of his strength and wrap his arms around Will to hold him.

But instead, Will stands frozen and watches as Hannibal dies.

When the blood stops flowing and Hannibal's chest fails to rise with a new whistling intake of breath, Will feels himself able to move again. When that happen, he recoils from what he's done.

There is a distant part of his mind - one that speaks in a reasonable tone that sounds very much like Hannibal - that says that this none of this is real, that it is some terrible nightmare that is reflective not of real actions nor even of his desires but of his most deeply rooted fears about himself, but that voice can not compete with the vivid and tactile reality of what he believes he sees before him, and in his desperation to wake from whatever hell he has found himself in he brings his hand to his mouth and bites down hard, and tastes his own welling blood.

Chapter End Notes

This one was rough, I know it. : /

Here is a cute gif of a little boy with a chicken. Let's pretend it's Tommy so we all cry less.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Content warning for self-harm on this one.

Go careful, friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal can smell the blood before he even reaches the landing at the top of the stairs.

Mr. Javok is in the hallway, rapping with soft insistence at the door to their flat. He turns when he hears Hannibal coming.

The old man opens his mouth to say something and Hannibal draws upon every ounce of icy viciousness in his possession and allows it to show on his face and to resonate in his voice as he growls, “Stay away from us.”

He only falls back a couple of steps, but it is enough for Hannibal to open the door and enter without allowing Mr. Javok to see inside. He locks the door behind himself carefully.

The puppy is in fact sick. Will had the right of it, and Hannibal has spent the walk home thinking about the best way to communicate this to Will without distressing him further, especially given how little information he has to offer.

They were still trying to work out exactly what was causing the pain in his abdomen and the low grade fever when Hannibal began to feel anxious about how long Will had been left alone, so he’d claimed to have another commitment that could not be rescheduled and left Winston there for overnight observation and more tests.

Now the dog is the furthest thing from his mind.

He stands completely still in the entryway and listens, and finds to his relief that he can hear Will breathing. The sound is ragged and unsteady, but exceedingly welcome; there was a part of him that believed, when he smelled the blood, that Will might have killed himself - he’d made more jokes and off-handed comments about that over the course of the last two month than Hannibal liked to hear.

The sound is coming from the kitchen, and Hannibal pads silently in that direction, conscious of the possibility that they might not be alone in the apartment.

The kitchen is almost entirely undisturbed, but blood flows in a creeping trickle from under the pantry door.

A bowl of Mr. Javok's tomatoes is lays overturned on the floor, crushed to a messy pulp, and Hannibal steps over them to open the pantry door.

It's a tiny nook of a pantry, considerably smaller than a closet. Will is on the floor, as far back into the shadows as he can get, his back pressed against the wall.

He lifts his head to look up at Hannibal, his bloody mouth slightly ajar and his eyes huge and wide in his face. Entreating, Will holds his hand out to Hannibal, fingers dripping blood, and Hannibal sees the bite marks and the torn flesh.

Will's hand is trembling so badly as he reaches up towards Hannibal that he tries to brace it at the elbow with his other hand, and when Will moves to do so Hannibal sees that the left has been even more badly damaged than the right.

"Please," Will says, in a shaky, little boy voice. "Please. I think I did something bad."

These aren't the love bites with which he sometimes still marks Hannibal, nor have they anything in common with even the deeper wounds that Will gave him back when he was in poor control. He's gone all the way down to the bone on his left index finger, and Hannibal thinks that he must have been making a sincere effort to bite it off.

Mauled is the word that comes to Hannibal's mind, and with the thought something in his brain turns off with an almost audible *click* and he feels the anxiety that had been building to a crescendo inside of him suddenly mute itself. A sense of emptiness overtakes him, but at least he can think clearly.

There is a great deal of blood - on Will's clothing and pooled around him, and his hands are still bleeding heavily, and Hannibal stands in the doorway and weighs the situation.

When he turns away Will lets out the faintest gasp, and to Hannibal it seems to be the sound of his heart breaking, but he doesn't let that distract him from his task.

He opens the drawer next to the kitchen sink and lifts out the silverware tray. One of the syringes Will loaded is taped beneath it, and Hannibal works it free and uncaps the needle and turns back to Will.

Will's eyes are frantic and confused when he sees the needle, and he pushes his back against the wall as though he might sink into it and thus escape.

When Hannibal crouches next to him Will grabs him by the wrist, and despite the pain it must cause him the grip is strong. He wonders if Will might, in his delirium, try to attack Hannibal in the same manner that he attacked himself, but Will only begs, a soft and frantic, "no no no no please no..." that seems to go on forever.

He is as terrified a rabbit caught in a wire snare, waiting for the hunter to reach out and end it all, and Hannibal considers trying to explain to Will that his hands need taken care of and quickly, that the larger gashes must be stitched shut and the rest bandaged before he looses anymore blood, and that Hannibal can't do that delicate and painful work while he is conscious, especially not when there is a risk that the police might come if Will screams.

Hannibal does not believe that Will is lucid enough to understand any of this, so he shakes his wrist free of Will's hold as gently as he can and he takes Will by the forearm, well above the bite

wounds, and with his other hand he uses the needle.

Will begins to flag almost at once. “What is that?” he asks, almost dreamily, and Hannibal isn’t sure if he’s being addressed or not.

“You’ll be alright,” Hannibal says. “You’re safe, Will. It’s alright.”

Will’s head lolls forward, and Hannibal gathers him up in his arms and carries him to the bed, where he does all that he can for Will’s hands.

Then Hannibal calls Margot.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't even seen this movie but this gif is in large part responsible for the above:

If you wanted a visual this is what's happening but Much Worse.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal is cleaning up the blood when he hears a knocking on the front door.

It is soft but insistent, carefully measured to avoid drawing the attention of their neighbors, and Hannibal knows exactly who it is.

He gets up from his knees and goes to the sink to wash the blood from his hands.

When Hannibal opens the door, Mr. Javok tells him, “You will let me in.” It is not a threat or a request, but rather a statement of fact, and Hannibal steps back to do just that.

Letting Mr. Javok see what Will has done to himself will not make things worse than they already are, and this way he will not invent some more nefarious explanation for what he must have overhead.

And Hannibal needs to see the old man anyway - to speak with him and to watch what he does, so he can figure out if he needs to kill him.

Mr. Javok goes to the bedroom and looks in at Will.

For a few seconds Hannibal stands behind him, looking over his shoulder to see Will as the old man sees him, and trying to gage if Mr. Javok is conscious of the vulnerability of his own position or senses any danger in Hannibal’s presence.

Will’s bandaged hands are folded over his navel, and small patches of blood has soaked through in a few places. He is still unconscious, and though this should not look considerably distinct from deep sleep, Hannibal can tell that there is something subtly different about it and supposes that Mr. Javok has probably been around the block enough times to do the same.

The encephalitis had already drained Will of color, and he is pallid as a sheet now. He turns his head to the side, fitful, but does not wake.

“He’s still ill,” Hannibal says, rather pointlessly.

“Why isn’t he in the hospital?”

“I’m taking care of him.”

“Maybe you aren’t doing such a good job.”

Hannibal feels frustration and anger turn over in his gut.

“Do you want tea?” he asks, his voice flat.

They go to the kitchen, and when Mr. Javok sees the blood on the floor he pauses before asking, “What is this?”

“He cut himself,” Hannibal says, because this lie sounds less appalling than admitting Will savage himself with his own teeth.

“Was he trying suicide?”

“No,” Hannibal says. He busies himself with the tea kettle, but as the silence stretches out he hears himself say, “His emotions are acutely powerful and he feels them very keenly. Sometimes, if he can’t bleed those feelings out one way or another, he finds himself completely overwhelmed, and the frustration makes him self-destructive.”

He wonders, having said it, if that is the truth; if the answer reflects Will’s self-deceit or his own, and if he is even capable of understanding - let alone articulating - the nature of the goad that drives Will to such extremes of fright and frightfulness.

He brings Mr. Javok a cup of tea and goes back to cleaning up the blood. He and Will will need to go soon, and it will look suspicious if they leave a pool of dried blood behind. And too, the presence of the mess itself is discomforting to him.

There is a small clink as Mr. Javok sets his cup in the saucer. “You want me to help you pack?” he asks, and Hannibal looks up sharply. “You’ll be leaving, yes?”

Hannibal’s voice is even as he says, “If you try to interfere I will kill you.”

Mr. Javok raises the tip of his cane and thumps it against the floor in acknowledgment.

“Do you know who we are?”

“Criminals, I suppose,” he answers almost casually. “Nothing more specific.”

Hannibal wonders what kind of backstory Mr. Javok has invented for them, if it is romantic and if, in this tale, every crime was done for the sake of love.

“Has he harmed himself like this before?” Mr. Javok asks, and Hannibal wonders if he has stopped - if they have both stopped - using Will’s false name because they know that the need for that pretext has passed.

“I don’t think so - not in the time that I’ve known him,” Hannibal says, though this is at least in part a lie; he remembers their first time after the prison and how Will bit his own hand in an effort to mitigate the delighted hilarity that Hannibal invoked in him, and how prone Will is towards worrying his lip between his teeth until it draws blood, especially lately.

He has understood, almost from the start, that Will is nearly as inclined toward hurting himself as he is others - that the two are, in fact, closely linked. Whatever undeniable good the killing does for him and however sincere his pleasure in the act, there is even - or maybe, especially - in that an element of self-harm, of pushing himself to extremes out of a desperate need to crush in himself what he sees as weakness.

“It was necessary,” Hannibal says, cleaning the last of the visible blood from around the baseboards, “that I ask myself if I am bad for him - if being near me hurts him in some way that I didn’t understand.”

“And?”

“It’s true that it’s almost… hideously difficult for him to accept the idea that he’s loved and wanted, but in this regard I am not the source of the problem. I might exasperate certain pre-existing, underlying troubles, but the issue has always been him against himself - against his own mind.”

“That’s difficult,” Mr. Javok says.

“That’s an understatement,” Hannibal says, standing. He pours the sudsy, pink-tinted water down the drain, then washes out the mop bucket and the sink itself. He dries his hands and turns back to Mr. Javok.

“You’ll help me pack?” Hannibal repeats.

As things stand now, he does not think that the old man intends to inform on them, but there is a clunky old monster of a desktop computer in Mr. Javok’s apartment, and he is at least decently proficient with google. Things might change if he realizes who he and Will are; the dead EMTs are likely to prick his conscience, even if Mason does not, and there’s a chance he might take the stories about why Matthew was killed sincerely. Hannibal has no intention of leaving him to his own devices.

As it turns out, Mr. Javok’s definition of “helping” is very much the same as Will’s; he watches and gives instructions and keeps up a running conversation while Hannibal does the actual work, though this is considerably less obnoxious in a man in his seventies.

When nearly everything is packed, he walks with Hannibal down to the parking garage while he loads the bags into the car.

When they are back upstairs, standing at the junction between the doors to their respective apartments, Mr. Javok asks, “Is there anything more I can do? Anything that you need that I can give you?”

Hannibal thinks for a moment, and then he says, “May I have some of your tomato seeds? If you have any to spare.”

He follows Mr. Javok into his apartment, closing the door behind.

Mr. Javok goes to his desk and stoops to open a draw and look inside. If Hannibal intends to kill the old man now is the time, he knows, while his guard is down and his back is to Hannibal. He knows also that this would be the safest course of action.

It would be no challenge to grab him by the back of the neck and force him down onto the couch, nor would it be difficult to hold a pillow over his face until he stopped breathing. Old skin bruises easily, but the authorities might dismiss it as natural causes. And regardless, no one is apt to check in on him unless the rent check is late or the smell coming from the apartment becomes troubling.

Mr. Javok was quite alone before Will and Hannibal moved in, and he will be again when they are gone.

If Mr. Javok can see what was on Hannibal’s mind while his back was turned, that knowledge does not reflect on his face when he turns around to face Hannibal. “Thank you,” Hannibal says, when Mr. Javok hands him three small envelopes.

They turn and walk back to the door, but instead of opening it Mr. Javok pauses. He leans his cane against the doorframe and looks levelly at Hannibal. “This is goodbye, then.”

“It is,” Hannibal agrees, and he shifts uncertainly on his feet. There is in him an impulse to hug the old man, but he is not sure if it would be correct to initiate such a thing, nor if his request would be seen as proper.

Mr. Javok understands, though, and he holds his arms out in encouragement for Hannibal to lean in and curl his own around him. It has been a frequent though unserious complaint of Will’s that Hannibal holds too tightly, that sometimes it feels as though Hannibal is trying to squeeze the air from his lungs, and so he is very careful with the old man.

Hannibal touches him gently, and only briefly, before drawing away.

Chapter End Notes

I almost ended up cutting the character of Mr. Javok from the story, because at first I didn't think he had much to contribute to the story, but a it turns out I think that I was wrong about that.

I hope that he was as interesting to read about as he was to write.

Chapter 20

Will wakes to agony, in a strange bed in a strange room.

Nothing is recognizable save for the black elk pelt, which has been laid over his lower body, and this he tries to fling it away, but his hands are stiff and wrapped in layers of bandages, and the movement sends bolts of pain shooting up his arms.

He cries out, and the sound is terrifying because he has no clear sense of where or who the noise has come from, though he thinks perhaps it could be some wounded animal. He wonders if it is the elk, sobbing because Will has stolen its skin.

Memory rebels against that; the shot that dropped the elk had been clean and decisive, and he had probably been dead before he'd had time to even realize that he'd been hurt. Will knows himself to be a good hunter, and has never caused an animal an instant of pain or fear that could be avoided, but the idea will not desert him, and he wants to get out of bed to go and find his knife and go to the elk so that he might make an end of this cruelty, but when he tries to push away the pelt and the other blankets the pain comes again, and this time he recognizes the cry as his own. The aching sympathy that had him nearly frantic to put the elk out of its misery turns instantly to self-loathing at himself for having made such pitiful noises.

He looks down at his hands, working hard to parse what is wrong with them. His head is throbbing, and Will sees in his mind's eye his brain the way he sees his hands, torn and bleeding beneath a constricting tangle of cotton bandages.

His vision blurs, and Will fights the urge to ball his fists against the sudden wave of vertigo. Hannibal's voice says, "Will," and his head swims as he looks sharply toward the sound.

Will feels a scream building in his throat, but before it can escape he sinks back down into blackness.

Hannibal sits next to the bed and waits.

Margot is making things happen very quickly - she located and rented this house, fully furnished and an hour outside of the city - within half an hour of Hannibal's call, but it will take some time to locate a neurologist with the skill set that they need who is amenable to taking bribes and keeping their mouth shut, and so for now he and Will are alone.

He has the antipsychotic meds, but the idea of giving Will one of the pills worries him. Hannibal does not know exactly what Will put in the syringe he used on him, and online databases caution the potential for dangerous interactions between sedatives and antipsychotics; that, on top of everything else Will is on, seems a bad risk.

But when Will wakes again, which he does suddenly and with a sharp gasp, his terror is such that Hannibal wonders if he has made the right choice. He stares at Hannibal, eyes wide and glassy, and Hannibal has a nearly overwhelming urge to look over his own shoulder to see what terrible threat has frighten him so, though he is perfectly aware that he is the source of Will's terror.

The smell of that fear is heavy in the air, strong enough to make Hannibal's stomach turn over uneasily.

Will's voice is shakey when he speaks, a dry croak. "Will you kill me?" he asks, and there is something about the delivery of these words that makes Hannibal wonder if it is a question or a request.

"Why would you ask me something like that?"

Will blinks quickly, his eyes turning up towards the ceiling as he thinks. "Because you are dead," he says finally, his tone quite reasonable. "I know that you don't want to be alone." He pauses again, and then adds, "So I should be dead, too."

"Will," Hannibal says, "I'm not dead."

"No," Will answers, the agitation flowing over him again like flood waters from a broken damn. "You are. You're dead."

"Will -"

"I cut you. I killed you. I ruined you. You're dead."

"I'm fine, Will. I'm alive; we both are."

Will's words come at a frenetic pace. "No. No. No, no, no. I saw it. I know what I saw. I know what I did."

"You've had nightmares like this before, Will. Remember? It wasn't real then and it isn't now."

There is, in Will's eyes, a spark of recognition that begins to bloom into an ember of hope. Then he shakes his head violently, extinguishing it, and says again, "No."

"You haven't hurt me," Hannibal says.

Will's voice is ragged; it might have been a scream, had he the strength to scream. "Stop lying to me."

Something happens then, and at first Hannibal doesn't understand it; a violent shudder runs through Will's body like a shock wave. "Please don't -" he begins to say, but then the shuddering overtakes him again, much worse this time.

His eyes roll back in his head, revealing the milky whites, and then the shuddering becomes convulsions that are violent enough to make the bed sway and creak beneath him.

Hannibal knows what a seizure looks like and he knows better than to try to hold Will down, but he feels bitterly helpless, watching Will's body jerk and pull itself into contorted extremes, and he balls his own hands together tightly to keep himself from interfering.

When Will's body shifts upwards on the mattress and he comes into risk of hitting his head on the headboard, Hannibal leans over and places a pillow in between it and him.

One of Will's hands slams against his thigh and he makes a strangled, inarticulate sound, the animal-like noise cutting off abruptly, and it occurs to Hannibal that there is something he can do

after all, so he reaches down and takes Will's wrists gently in his hands. He does not try to fight against the spasming muscles, but holds Will's hands suspended in the air, trying to guide them away from striking anything again.

The shaking that follows when it's over is mild in comparison, though it makes Will's entire sweat-drenched body shiver.

Lucidity returns slowly, but when it does Will says with a sort of baffled exhaustion, "I just had a seizure, didn't I?"

"Just a small one," Hannibal assures him.

Neither of them are sure if he's telling the truth.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> I know that this story has been terribly depressing and distressing for... several chapters now, but things are on the upswing and I look for the next (last? who knows) story in the series to be considerably more pleasant.
>
> Look forward to Nazi hunting in Argentina, quiet walks on the beach, Hannibal turning golden and Will going red from the sunshine, good food, and Will picking up a bad habit for letting stray dogs follow him home...

With the rising of the sun Will feels more clearhead.

He watches the band of light the flows in through the window as it creeps forward, drawing nearer to him. It inches along the floor, falling over Hannibal, who sleeps with his chin against his shoulder in a chair near the bed, and the light turns him golden. With sadness Will reflects how many times Hannibal has been left to sleep in just that position because of him.

When the rays of sunlight begin to crawl up Will's body, he feels cleansed in the places where it touches him, even through the blankets. The light sparkles on the fur of the black elk hide, making it as iridescent as a raven's wing.

When the light washes over his face, glittering and bright with the reflection of the snow, Will closes his eyes against the brilliance of it and tilts his head back to bask in the glow.

He knows what he has to do now, and there are important things that he needs to say to Hannibal, but there is no great hurry.

In his chair, Hannibal stirs, and Will opens his eyes and turns his head to meet his Hannibal's gaze.

"Good morning," Will says.

Hannibal blinks at him, almost mistrusting, but then he repeats, "Good morning."

"I made a mistake," Will says apologetically. "When I had you get me meds, I forgot about the anticonvulsant. I'm sorry I worried you."

Hannibal closes his eyes and empties his lungs in an almost noiseless sigh.

"It's probably okay," Will tries to assure him. "But do we have a hand mirror here? Would you get it for me, hold it up?"

When Will looks at his reflection he sees that he has no eyes. Black coals rest in the rear of his eye sockets, gleaming with sparks of red hot malice. It is Will's turn to close his eyes and sigh, though he does so with considerably more frustration than did Hannibal.

He looks again, and this time there is nothing preternatural about his face, though his skin is a ghastly shade of pallid white, gleaming with a thin coat of sweat. The paleness is offset by the dark rings around his eyes.

Will smiles at the mirror, as widely as he can. The effect is gruesome, the razor-cut grin reminding him forcefully of smile he'd carved under Hannibal's chin during his hallucination, but both sides of his face are equally responsive.

Raising a bandaged hand, he prods gently at the skin under his eyes and down the sides of his face. He feels no numbness or tingling.

"I think it's alright. You can take the mirror away."

"The seizure was the least of it."

"I know it. Listen - I'm mortified with myself, Hannibal, I'm just trying to accept the situation gracefully."

"How are your hands?"

"They hurt. I don't know, beyond that."

"Margot is sending Cordell to patch you up. And a specialist, once her people find one."

Will nods, accepting the necessity of that though it brings another sting of shame.

"Why did you do that to yourself?" Hannibal asks, and his voice and face are wary.

"I couldn't tell what was real," Will says slowly, and doesn't add that he's still not entirely sure that he's awake now. "And I think that I was trying to make up for what I thought I'd done to you."

"What did you believe you'd done?"

Will tells him. He watches Hannibal's hands flex as he takes this in, fingers balling into fists and then opening up again.

Will reaches out and catches one of Hannibal's hands in his own stiff and bandaged ones. He looks up at Hannibal, wide eyes questioning. "Can I?"

Hannibal nods.

Turning the hand over, Will studies the scars along Hannibal's knuckles; the biggest and brightest of them, he knows, were made when Hannibal tore his own skin against Will's teeth.

Will brings the hand to his mouth and lays a kiss on the scars. Hannibal's eyes close, and as his head tips up slightly as a faint smile plays on his lips. That gives Will cause for hope.

"We need to talk about things. I need to find a way to be better - to myself and to you - but I'm afraid that I'll need some help."

"Good, but not right now."

"No," Will agrees. "Right now I'm tired and… everything is strange inside my head, still."

He wets his tattered lips and feels the string when two of the cuts where he worried the skin open start to bleed again. His belly feels like it is full of rotten meat, roiling with a sick heat. Will asks, “Did I kill Winston?”

“No, Will. He’s at the vet’s - we can talk about that later, but he’s alright.”

“Mr. Javok?”

The pause makes Will’s anxiety spike into terror, but Hannibal says, “You only hurt yourself.”

The news makes Will feel pathetically grateful.

“But what's wrong with the dog?”

“You were right about him needing to go to the vet’s. He swallowed part of a sock, and it was wrecking havoc on his digestive system. The vet thought they might need to do surgery, but he… hm, passed it last night. I’ve got them boarding him for a few days.” Hannibal pauses. “I hadn’t realized dogs were so disgusting,” he says, with no real animosity.

“Mm-hmm, puppies will eat anything,” Will says fondly, though his sense of relief is profound. He adds, “I should rest some more,” and Hannibal yawns hugely in response.

“I wish you'd come to bed with me.”

“You were frightened of me last night.”

Will know this hurts and worries Hannibal more than hearing about Will’s hallucination, maybe even more than what he’s done to his hands. “It wasn’t your fault,” Will assures him. “And it might happen again. But I still wish you’d come to bed.”

Hannibal is careful not to jostle the mattress as he climbs into the bed. They are both asleep again, soon after that.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal dreams of being eaten alive.

There is a wolf tearing at his insides, and Hannibal knows that the animal is terrified but that terror makes its teeth no less sharp.

He tries to reach out to soothe the animal, burying his fingers in its thick ruff, but the wolf's head darts forward and in an instant the teeth slice his hands down to the bone. When Hannibal cries out the wolf whimpers in real sympathy, but then it goes on eating.

Hannibal persists at stroking it, and his blood mats the wolf's shaggy neck even as it stains its muzzle red inside of him. *If I can help it to calm down it will stop,* he thinks. *It will be able to stop, if it isn't so afraid*. Hannibal knows that he is already as good as dead - that he not going to be able to survive what has already been done to him, no matter what - but he feels with the strong certainty of dreams that if only the wolf will lay down peaceably beside him for a time that will be okay.

He wakes before he can learn what happens next.

Will is beside him, sleeping the deep and nearly deathlike sleep of the exsanguinated.

Hannibal is not disturbed by the memory of the dream. It does not affect him in the way of a nightmare, though he knows that if he were to share it Will would interpret it in a manner that would leave him grief stricken with guilt.

It makes him thoughtful instead, and he looks down at Will's smooth and pale face and thinks, *That's what he's afraid of, maybe even more than the possibility that I might hurt him again.*

Will is longer in waking, but when he does he looks up at Hannibal and smiles softly. "Hey, darlin'."

Hannibal studies Will's eyes carefully to make certain that he is lucid.

Then he says, with carefully measured detachment, "Do you wonder about what I would have done, had you decided to kill me in the basement?"

Will frowns. "I don't like to think about that."

"I'll tell you; I would have picked you apart, Will, down to the bone. The things that I said to hurt you? That was only the start of what I might have done. I would have left you emotionally eviscerated before I died."

Will's defiance is panicky for all its viciousness. "Not if I'd gagged you. Or - or, if I'd taken out your tongue, you couldn't have done anything."

Hannibal ignores this; it is a defense mechanism, and irrelevant to the point he is making. "I think," he continues, "that I could have gotten you to kill yourself - not right away, not soon enough to

save myself, but eventually, once you had time to sit down and think about what happen. I would have tried."

"Christ," Will says, wounded, and shifts his body as best he can without the use of his hands, putting space between himself and Hannibal. "Good morning to you too, I guess. I really wanted to wake up to my fiancé informing me how easy it would be to suicide bait me, on top of everything else, so thanks for that."

"I want you to understand how things are. Sometimes, Will, I think you forget who I am. I think that you start to feel like I'm just some lovestruck old man that tolerates your proclivities because that's preferable to lonesomeness."

Will sniffs spitefully. "Aren't you?"

"I let you get away with as much as I do because I know that you didn't plan for any of this - for having to cope with being in love, most of all - but that you really are doing your best in the face of a series of difficult situations. And I'm kind to you because I love you and because I don't think that you are undeserving of kindness, even if you can't allow yourself recognize that. I could act differently, if I wanted to, but those are the choices that I chose to make."

"You aren't being very kind right now," Will says, but Hannibal sees the relief coming into him despite his resistance.

Even when he is flat on his back, Will tries to carry more than he needs to, but Hannibal senses some of that weight shifting now, maybe even falling away, so he continues.

"If you were to try to do me harm, Will, I would defend myself. You don't have to worry that I wouldn't. That's not something that you need to be afraid of.

"Look at it this way; what do you think you would do if you really did kill me?"

Will's bandaged hands twitch, as though he'd like to hide them. "You figure it out, since you're so keen on pointing out that I'm a suicide risk."

Hannibal nods as though Will has proven his point. He is unagitated. "Look what happened when you simply imagined that you'd killed me - the way you punished yourself. Defending myself from you would amount to also protecting you.

"And it's all moot, in any case, because you'd never really hurt me."

Hannibal knows that Will knows this, but he argues anyway - his self-perception demands it. "You don't know that. Anything could happen."

Hannibal smiles at him fondly. "Even when you were convinced that it needed to happen it didn't happen.

"I'm not your victim, Will. I never was and I never will be."

When Hannibal leans in to kiss him on the forehead Will doesn't try to stop him, though his face flinches slightly.

"Now," Hannibal says, "what shall we have for breakfast?"

Chapter End Notes

It's past time for hard truths, isn't it, especially when they aren't so difficult once they've been discussed?

Chapter 23

“Oh Margot,” Will says, when she steps into the bedroom, “you shouldn’t be here.”

It was on Hannibal’s tongue to tell her the same thing, when he found her waiting at the front door with Cordell - to say that he hadn’t thought that she would come personally and to ask if it is safe for her to have done so, but it seemed unwise to question her judgement at this juncture.

Hannibal is not exactly frightened of her right now, but caution seems justified.

When Margot doesn’t answer beyond the simmering, unimpressed stare she fixes on him, Will says, a bit uneasily, “You must be really pissed with me. I messed up big time.”

“Here’s how this trick works,” Margot says, looking not at Will but Hannibal. “Good ol’ Will takes the blame right out the gate, makes a semi-apology, and then attributes some negative emotional response to the other person, who at least in my case is indeed pissed - and rightly so - and the end result is that if you persist in being displeased with him then you end up feeling like the bad guy.”

“I'm familiar with the tactic,” says Hannibal, who generally finds Will's approach both clever and useful, at least when not directed at himself.

“Geez,” Will says, and his hurt is probably genuine. “I was just trying to defuse things.”

When that doesn’t soften Margot or bring Hannibal to his defense, he grumbles, “I’m such a cruel sonofabitch but y'all are the ones who are ganging up on a sick man.”

“Are you looking for pity?” Margot demands.

“Christ. Anything but.”

“Why didn’t you call me sooner? Why did Hannibal have to do it?”

I don’t know, Margot. If I’d known you were going to personally fly all the way out here just to chew me out I’d’ve gotten in touch.”

She sighs, meeting Hannibal’s eyes as she does so. Hannibal shrugs.

Cordell has brought a local anesthetic, which he gives to Will. He has restraints, too, and when he moves to attach the first cuff to the bed frame Hannibal sees the breathless dread with which Will traces his movements.

“No,” Hannibal says.

“He’s likely to hurt himself again,” Cordell says, though it is evident that this is not something that really concerns him.

“I’ll watch and make sure that he doesn’t.”

“If he’s psychotic enough to bite himself he won’t hesitate to bite someone else,” Cordell says, as though Will isn’t there. “I don’t intend to get bitten.”

Will finds his voice. “I’ll do a whole holy hell more than bite you if you come near me with those things,” he says, his voice low and rough. There is an undercurrent of abject terror in his voice, far more dangerous in its desperation than Will’s effort at intimidation, though Hannibal does not think Cordell is keen enough to notice.

“Give us a few minutes,” Hannibal tells Cordell, and the fool may be too tone deaf to take Will’s threats or fear seriously, but when Hannibal stares at him levelly he goes.

When they are alone, Hannibal says softly, “We have to make this work.”

“I know it,” Will says. “But, I can’t -

“Jesus, Hannibal, I can’t. I *know* how helpless you are after they get you in those. Anything could happen.”

Hannibal, who spent nearly twenty-four hours a day in wrist restraints during his stay in the hospital and who has absolutely no intention of allowing Will to be served in the same way for even a minute, says, “Let’s try something else, then.”

He confers briefly with Cordell in the hallway, then he goes to scrub his own hands. When Hannibal comes back into the bedroom, he is alone and he has Cordell’s kit.

“I’m going to do the first parts myself,” Hannibal says, drawing a chair and a stainless steel tray table up to the bed. “That way you don’t have to put up with him touching you for longer than necessary.”

“Good,” Will says. “Okay. Thank you.”

Will watches Hannibal as he pulls on a pair of latex gloves. “I wish Margot would replace him,” Will says. “Cordell is a worm. He ought to be underground.”

It is on Will’s tongue to note that Cordell hadn’t only cleaned up Mason’s messes when the victims were strangers to him, that he’s sewn up knife wounds and worse on Margot, but even as fuzzy has his brain feels, he catches himself before the disclosure falls from his lips. He knows that Hannibal has almost certainly worked this out for himself, but it is the principle of the thing.

Hannibal is unwinding the bandage tape from the first of Will’s hands. The injections Cordell gave him are working, and Will’s hands feel wooden and heavy and numb. They feel like foreign things, utterly disconnected from his body, and that sense of alienation grows as Hannibal’s deft fingers reveal what’s underneath the bandages.

“ *Christ,* ” Will hisses, when he sees his right hand.

Hannibal sighs. “The other is worse,” he warns Will.

He’s more right than Will wants him to be, and lifting his hands and turning them over Will feels panic grown in tandem with a sense of unreality.

“Oh, look at this now,” he says, and Hannibal doesn’t know if he’s speaking to Hannibal or himself. “Just look at this bullshit.

“I’m not supposed to be like this. I worked so fucking hard not to be like this.”

“I know,” Hannibal says, and Will sees him reaching for some way to help and coming up empty. The effort is, in of itself, to a certain degree comforting, but it can’t overpower the despair provoked by the swollen and tattered state of his hands. There’s a doubling behind Will’s eyes, that first shameful bite he’d laid on Hannibal’s flesh and… this.

“They’ll heal,” Hannibal says, at last, with a finality that says it is all he has to offer.

“They’ll scar,” Will says. “Everyone will stare. People will ask questions, and they’ll remember me. The scrutiny will be a risk, too.”

“On a man, a good pair of lambskin gloves can look quite elegant,” Hannibal says. “Especially for someone with hands like yours. We’ll figure it out, Will.”

When Cordell comes back into the room, Hannibal climbs into the bed with Will. He sits with his back against the headboard, and Will leans against him, his body between Hannibal’s spread legs.

Hannibal curls his arms around Will. It is a restraining hold, but Hannibal does what he can to keep it from feeling that way. He leans his head against Will’s shoulder and whispers in his ear while Cordell goes to work. Under the side of his palm Hannibal can feel the frantic pounding of Will’s captive heart.

He dislikes watching Cordell touch Will, resents the fact that the other man is in possession of a skill set that Hannibal lacks. If they are going to be in such an ugly mess, Hannibal would like to be the one to stitch things back together.

The bites continue to mystify Hannibal. He has, in the past, kept himself on an extremely short leash, out of an acute awareness that his instincts and desires would be viewed as intolerably ugly by anyone else who happened to glimpse what was going on beneath the surface of the detached face he presented to the world. This, however, was simply a matter of pragmatics - a way of getting along without landing himself in trouble, and Hannibal has never felt a sense of shame or guilt so profound as to make him desire to do harm to himself - to tear at himself, the way that Will has.

Hannibal thinks that it must take a specific type of love to animate that type of violence, and as deficient as Will feels himself to be in the matter of love, this is a facet of that emotion that Hannibal feels to be inaccessible to him. It is the absence of an instinct towards self-preservation, he thinks, and then this thought comes to him; Will might be a willing cannibal, but if it had been *his* sister he would have rather starved to death than take the soup, or at least he would have had less selfish reasons for eating.

He thinks again of the addresses that Will gave him. Hannibal always keeps the piece of folded paper with him, though he has long ago committed the addresses to memory, and several times a day he reaches into his pocket to touch it.

A nagging worry has plagued Hannibal these last few days. Grutas is a very old man. What if he should happen to die while he is busy caring for Will?

Will mutters, “I’m some special kind of coward, huh? Can’t take the tiniest fraction of what I dish out,” and Hannibal understands that he is still thinking about the restraints. He hushes Will, lest he say something that it would be better for Cordell not to overhear.

Will falls asleep when it’s over with, still leaning back against Hannibal. Hannibal stays where he is, glad to be there, though his legs have gone numb and Will’s weight against his belly makes his scar ache.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shortly after Cordell leaves the bedroom, Margot goes in. She wants to talk to Will and Hannibal, yes, but the truth is also that she doesn't like to be in the same room alone with Cordell.

Will is asleep in Hannibal's arms, and she feels something warm in her heart at seeing that, like wax dripping from a burning candle. Hannibal is awake though, sitting up against the headboard, and he inclines his head in greeting.

She sits facing him in one of the chairs. "Last time this happened, you know, he said some things that were pretty morbid."

"Oh?"

"Mostly elaborate descriptions of what he wanted to do to Mason. That was probably a red flag, huh?"

"Or a good sign, depending on how you look at it. Even when he was out of his mind his thoughts were of you and how he might help you with your problems."

"That was how I thought about it, to a degree. I thought. 'It's touching that he cares enough about me to get that angry on my behalf, but thank god he has enough sense to keep those kinds of thoughts and feelings on lockdown while he's well, because they could get him in a world of trouble."

Hannibal makes a soft, chuffing laugh. Will's head turns to the side, and he stirs, pressing himself more closely against Hannibal, but he doesn't wake.

Margot watches Will. "He was sick for weeks - maybe months - before he told anyone. You know how a dying cat will hide away from its family?" Hannibal nods. "It was like that. He withdrew into himself. I thought for a while that I'd done something to make him feel angry with me, or disgusted. Then I started to wonder if he was planning on killing himself, and was cutting ties beforehand.

"I think I was right about that, though I didn't have all the information at the time. I think he believed he was going insane and decided to kill himself before it got worse, but he landed in the hospital before he could."

Hannibal's fingers trail through Will's hair, thoughtful. "Did you ever ask him?"

"You can't ask a psychiatrist if they're suicidal. They expect to get an honest answer to that question from you, but they'll lie every time."

"He isn't suicidal now."

Margot shrugs. "He knows what's happening to himself this around. And he knows he isn't alone - you haven't let him cut himself off."

She sees that Hannibal wants to accept this praise; he wants to take refuge and pride in the reassurance that he's managed the crisis alone more effectively than everyone else in Will's life the last time around. But: "He didn't hurt himself when he was sick before?"

"Nothing nearly as extreme as this."

"He loves me, but he's so scared of me, and for me, and of himself. It's hard to know how to help."

Margot tells him, "You shouldn't have let him try this alone."

"'Let him'?" Hannibal repeats. They are not really fighting, but Will stirs at the slightly elevated sounds of their voices; Margot recognizes where that type of hypervigilance comes from. "Have you ever tried to stop him doing something that he's decided he's going to do?"

"That's not the point. You could have called."

Will's eyes blink open, and he turns his head to look at her. "Hannibal doesn't hold my leash, Margot."

She ignores this. "There's a neurologist coming in later today. We're trying to figure out what strings to pull and levers to grease to get you a session with the MRI without catching the wrong kind of attention."

"Is this all setting you back more or less than a couple million dollars?"

"So far as I'm concerned it's Monopoly money, Will. Leave it alone."

"You put so much into helping Hannibal and me over the last year. I don't want to be -"

"A burden. Yes, I know. God forbid you surrender control long enough to let someone else help you with anything rather than the other way around."

He glances back at Hannibal, as though looking for backup, but Hannibal has retreated to the metaphorical sidelines. He is observing this exchange with an expression that Margot can't quite read.

Will says, "Maybe we can save the hard truths for some time when I'm not just short of actively dying."

"At least you admit it's the truth," Margot returns.

"I wish you'd stop picking at me."

"You scared me."

Will struggles to sit up straighter, pressing the sides of his wrists against Hannibal's thighs for leverage. "I'm sorry. I thought it was going to work. I'd been through the treatment before and it worked last time, and I did have a goddamn MD, in case you've forgotten, and it *seemed* like I was getting better -"

"Will -"

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I didn’t want to get sick, I didn’t ask to get sick, I didn’t do it on purpose, but I’m sorry that you were scared and I’m sorry if you don’t believe that I’m sorry but I am and that’s the best I can do for you. I’m not trying to hurt either of you.”

“Can you stop deflecting? I’m not mad at you because you got sick, Will, and you know it. I’m angry because something serious was happening, and you locked me out instead of letting me give you the help I could have given you before it got this bad.”

She can tell that Will still wants to argue, but instead he takes a deep breath and turns his head to the side, and Margot realizes with shocked wonderment that he is fighting against tears. Even as ill as he is, it did not occur to Margot that Will was even capable of such vulnerability, but because of the way he is struggle is so obviously unwelcome she knows that this is not Will trying to take control of the situation through a delicate manipulation of the emotional climate of the room, but uncalculated and unfiltered grief.

Margot recognizes that fear does not influence the choices that she makes in regard to Hannibal and Will in the way that it would were she herself normal. She is plagued by anxieties in nearly every aspect of her life, though she has learned (in large part by merit of Will’s help) to keep her head up and to make it through without seeming to let it faze her. These two men, however, invoke very little fear in her, despite the voice of conventional wisdom that tells her that by all rights she ought to be terrified by such killers.

She knows that voice is fundamental incorrect. Though she hesitates now, worried that she has gone too far, the anxiety comes from a fear that she has done harm to Will rather that either of them will hurt her in retaliation.

Hannibal hand comes up to cup Will’s skull, just above the ear, gently pressing the side of his head against his chest, but when he looks over Will to meet Margot’s gaze there is no rebuke in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

These have been kinda slow, but there's a major event coming up pretty soon, and I'm excited for it.

Chapter 25

There's a fifty thousand dollar reward on offer for information leading directly to Will's apprehension, and the bounty on Hannibal's head is twice that. Margot has paid the neurologist a considerably larger sum for his service and his silence, but apparently it has not been enough to buy basic courtesy, as the man persists in treating both himself and Will as though they are fools.

Will takes the rebuke with quiet resignation, though there is something subtle in the gleaming of his eyes that suggests to Hannibal that he is having a pleasant time dissecting the doctor in his imagination.

Hannibal understands that. Sometimes, when the neurologist is speaking, Hannibal imagines what a relief it would be to cut out that insulting tongue and jam it down the man's throat.

Nonetheless, Will's recovery becomes more secure under the neurologist's care. He does not do all that much more than Will had already instructed Hannibal to do, and Will gripes about this on occasion, in private, claiming that they simply hadn't given his own approach enough time to work.

The last nail in the illness's coffin comes a few days after the neurologist's arrival, with the introduction of the plasmapheresis machine. When the tacky plastic and metal device shows up in their bedroom, Hannibal spends a considerable amount of time considering it, watching Will's blood flow into the machine through the first of the lines to the venous catheter that is embedded in one of the large veins next to his heart, where it is put through a centrifuge to remove the autoantibodies that have caused so much trouble, before flowing back into Will's body through the other IV line.

"Dreadful, isn't it?" Will asks.

"You just can't seem to keep your blood where it belongs."

"I've taken some hard licks over the last couple of years, haven't I?"

Hannibal nods, thinking about the new scars that Will has picked up since he met him, and the ones that are still forming. He sits down on the bed, angling himself to face Will.

His face is still pallid and moist, but he looks better than he has in weeks. His eyes, especially, have improved; they are mellow now, and full of warmth for Hannibal. "But I'm alright," Will says. "I'm going to be alright."

"I know."

"Why don't you take the evening for yourself, then? I can fend for myself - or well, if not, Margot is here." It is difficult for Will to do anything more complicated than holding a spoon with his bandaged hands, and Hannibal has been helping him dress and to bathe. He worried that being so dependent would fill Will with a resentful sense of captivity, but Will has taken fairly well to being even more completely under his care.

Will continues. "Go buy yourself something nice. Or see a show and get something good to eat."

“There’s little pleasure in eating alone,” Hannibal says. After a pause, he adds, “I had something else in mind.”

He knows that Will already knew as much. “Yeah?”

“Maybe I should wait, though, until you can come along with me. I thought you might want to see.”

“You aren’t doing it for me,” Will says. It is a statement, but there’s a ghost of a question there, too, that little thread of insecure doubt. Even if it takes years, Hannibal intends to make a project of burying Will’s suspicions that he has corrupted him so deeply that no one ever finds the bones.

“No, I am not.”

“It’s no good if you’re doing it for anyone other than yourself.”

“I’m doing it for myself.” And then; “For Mischa as well.”

“Then it’s something you ought to do by yourself, isn’t it?”

There is, nonetheless, a shred of disappointment in Will’s face at the prospect of being left out, though he clearly believes himself to have the right of it.

“There will be others,” Hannibal reassures him.

Will opens his mouth as though to say something, then wets his lips and closes it again. After a pause, he speaks.

“The next one we’ll take together,” Will says, and there is such a shyness in his voice that Hannibal feels his heart stir at the fragility of Will’s sense of daring.

“Oh yes.”

“When are you going?”

“After dinner,” Hannibal tells him.

Hannibal is chopping vegetables when Margot joins him in the kitchen. He turns from the stove long enough to acknowledge her with a nod, then goes back to work.

“Smells good.”

“Chicken soup,” Hannibal says, but does not elaborate.

“That’s a good idea,” Margot answers. “You know what he’d really like, though? Game - venison or wild pig.”

Half a dozen appalling puns jump to the tip of Hannibal’s tongue and dance there, eager to be spoken aloud, variations on the themes of dangerous game and rarified tastes and just how discomforting most people would find Will’s idea of comfort food.

You know, Margot, he thinks, *I didn't quite know what to make of your brother when I met him, but if Mason was here now he could really give me a hand with dinner.*

He doesn't risk it. Margot is sharp and she already knows enough that putting the pieces together would be all too easy. Hannibal wonders if she has spent much time thinking about what became of the missing piece of Mason.

Hannibal's own tolerances for Will's particular tastes have expanded with time more than he'd expected they could, but he doubts Margot would respond well to that particular revelation. She has been accommodating so far, but even the closest friendships have their limits.

So he keeps silent, the knife pausing thoughtfully for a moment before he goes back to work.

"Why don't you take a break and let me do that? You must be exhausted, you've been carrying so much -"

"Will isn't heavy," he says, but without any heat. "And I'm in no way lacking in stamina."

"You think I've been too harsh with him?"

"It's an odd contrast, isn't it, that Will can be so talented at encouraging others in the belief it is safe to open up, yet so miserably guarded about his own needs and emotions?"

Margot observes, "You're talking around the question."

Hannibal puts down the knife and turns to face her. "Will builds walls around himself, and if left to his own devices he's apt to allow himself to suffer in isolation. Sometimes it's necessary for us to scale the walls, and sometimes it is in his best interests to tear them down, whether he likes it or not.

"Despite all that has happened - the inconvenience of his having become ill again now - he was doing better, and I think now that he will be even more willing to commit to facing up to some of his demons and opening himself up for me."

He adds, "For you as well, to a somewhat lesser degree."

"You sound very sure of yourself. Are you certain that isn't hubris?"

Hannibal doesn't answer. "It's hard for him to have you here, and not just because it shames him to be seen while he's in such bad shape. He's upset because he can't stop thinking about what might happen to you if you were found here with us.

"However, that doesn't mean that it isn't a good thing that you came."

"I know. But it's safe - I've got all my bases covered."

"Good. And I hope that you stay with us for a while longer."

"I was planning being here for the rest of the week at least."

"I'm glad - you help him, being here, even if he frets. And I have a favor to ask you."

Margot smiles; she has, in the past, found enjoyment in his requests, Hannibal knows. "Another?"

“Can you keep an eye on him this evening? There’s something I need to take care of, and I might be out late.”

Margot’s smile disappears abruptly. “What are you up to?”

Hannibal debates the merits of lying - directly or by omission. But he knows Margot will not believe the first and will not be satisfied with the other.

And too, he finds that he would like her to know the truth, or at least parts of it. “When I was ten,” he says, “my little sister was murdered.”

He gives Margot a few seconds to process that, watching the surprise turn to a thoughtful sadness as she studies his face. “She was not considerably older than Thomas," he continues, "and…”

But whatever might have come after that is a bridge too far. It is, he thinks, something that he will only ever share with the men who did it, and with Will.

He finishes instead, “And one of the men who did this to her lives only a two hour drive from here.

“So.”

He lets that dangle, waiting to see if Margot will challenge the idea, if she will tell him that now is not the time, that he should not take such risks when Will is still so ill, or even that revenge will avail him nothing.

She is better than that, though.

Hannibal wonders if Will would feel guilty, seeing how easily Margot has come to accept murder as a solution to such problems, but he himself has little doubt that she has benefited from the example Mason’s death provided, and from her friendship with himself and Will.

Margot looks up at him levelly. He is struck by how young she is, how well put together, how brave.

She draws him down to her level and places a chaste kiss on his cheek, and Hannibal thinks, *I have a sister.*

“Be careful,” she tells him. “Don’t get caught this time.”

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal worried that he might find the old Nazi wandering inside his own head, too senile to remember what he had done or to understand why Hannibal was hurting him.

But when he leans over the sleeping man and cups one hand over his mouth just as he reaches out with the other to click on the bedside lamp, the recognition that comes into those wide and glassy eyes as Hannibal's face is illuminated by the dull bulb is more than reassurance enough.

It is not a specific sort of recognition, but that's perfectly all right. Hannibal came here with no expectations that Grutas would see in him the starving small boy he had once been.

He has not been waiting for Hannibal exactly, but he has been waiting nonetheless for this - for something like this - to happen for a very long time. Hannibal is pleased by that. He hopes that Grutas' fear has been a cage to him, that it has sucked the savor from his life, which has surely been allowed to go on longer than it ought to have.

"Who has haunted your dreams?" Hannibal wonders aloud. "KGB? Mossad? Some Resistance fighter, unwilling to bury personal or political grievances and allow you to simply slip, with no accountability, back into civilian life?"

He gives Grutas no opportunity to reply. Hannibal has decided that there is nothing that the old man could say to him that would be of interest.

"You should have been so lucky."

Hannibal knows how he looks, how frightening his face can be when bathed in dim light. How deep-set his eyes, skull-like. He uses it, looming over the old man, Death like, and Grutas' terror is such that long moments pass before he finds the will to struggle.

When he does, Hannibal bats his flailing fists away. With the hand still gripping Grutas' jaw he shakes the old man, sharply, like a terrier with a rat, stunning him into a brief, shocked stillness. He takes his hand away from Grutas' mouth long enough to smooth the length of duct tape he had at the ready over it, and though Grutas manages to get out a fragment of a croaking shout first, it make no matter; the little house is isolated, and no one will hear.

The tape is more to prevent unwelcome conversation than to ensure that they won't be overheard, and jerking his head up from the pillows by the hair Hannibal winds a longer length of tape all the way around his head to hold the first firmly in place.

He tears the blankets away from the bed, and then he turns Grutas over onto his belly and wrenches his arms behind his back. Something snaps in Grutas' shoulder and his scream is muffled but not entirely blocked out by the tape, and Hannibal pauses, drawing a bone deep satisfaction from the sound and from the feel of Grutas' struggling beneath his hands, finding nourishment for a hunger that has gone unsated for more than forty years.

He binds Grutas' hands behind his back and flips him over again, then climbs into the bed and straddles his legs.

Pressing one hand against the center of Grutas' chest to pin him against the mattress, with his free hand Hannibal takes the folding knife from his pocket and holds it up for Grutas to see as he reveals the hawk-billed blade. His eyes bulge then begin to flick from side to side in desperate denial, as though seeking some escape route.

Coming here, Hannibal was undecided as to exactly what he planned to do, but now he looks down at Grutas and knows what he wants.

Hannibal switches from Russian to Lithuanian. "What was it like," he asks, cocking his head to the side as he studies Gratus' face, "butchering my sister?"

Now Grutas knows, and seeing that knowledge bloom on his face is delicious.

He squeals against the gag, but the noise is muffled enough that Hannibal does not have to raise his voice when he says, "I am going to see your living heart beating in the open cavity of your chest. I am going to hold it in my hand and feel it spasming against my palm, and then I am going to crush it in my fist, and I am going to watch your face while I do all of this."

But it does not go the way Hannibal hopes.

Hannibal works quickly, but the knife is not ideal for this task and even such an elderly and wasted ribcage is not easily sprung. With his free hand he keeps Grutas pinned against the bed, and for a while he squirms and tries to buck Hannibal off. His eyes howl beneath the duct tape as Hannibal saws at bone and cartilage.

But by the time Hannibal pries open the ribcage to look inside a space that has never before seen the light, Grutas has stopped fighting. His head lolls back against the pillows, eyes vacant. There is still a vague flutter of movement in the lungs, but the wrinkled old heart is quite still.

Hannibal gets up from the bed and turns his back on the corpse, feeling bitterly cheated. When he was killing the old fascist there was a vicious, joyous satisfaction, but now that Grutas is dead Hannibal feels hollowed out and dissatisfied.

It is the sense of emptiness that most disappoints him, the acute awareness that all of the empty places inside of himself remain that way - that this has neither filled them nor soothed their ache.

"Forty years, you Nazi sonofabitch," Hannibal says, and is not really startled to realize that the anger he feels is, in a way, Will's. He feels the anger it the way he imagines Will would feel it on his behalf, and his words come in the same pattern and timbre as Will's might. His own rage is a stone encased in ice, resting heavily in the pit of his stomach, where he can not reach it. "Forty years, and I'm still not -"

Not what? he wonders. *Better? Whole?*

Maybe, he wonders, *I have no right to be so angry - to lay everything that is wrong with me at the feet of Grutas and his friends. Maybe I was born like this, and any other explanation I offer for myself is simply the imposition of a false narrative after the fact.*

Hannibal can't say.

What he does know is that sense of some internal vacancy shrinks down to almost nothing when Will is with him, and that he fills in gaps for Will as well, even if the meeting point between the two of them is sometimes fraught or even jagged.

That's good enough. At this late date, it is more than he'd ever thought to dream of.

He unfolds his blade again and goes back to work on the body.

The kitten takes Hannibal by surprise, batting at his ankle while Hannibal is still leaning over the body, and when he turns and sees the little tabby-coated cat his first impulse is to lash out at her, to break to pieces anything for which Grutas might have held affection, but he checks himself with a careful, conscious effort.

She jumps onto the bed, padding towards the body curiously, and when Hannibal sees that she is an instant away from stepping in the pooled blood he picks the cat up, though his own hands are smeared with gore.

No one, Hannibal feels confident, is going to come looking for Grutas any time soon. It will very likely be days or maybe weeks until his corpse is found, and if he leaves the cat here she will be trapped alone with the body. She may eat some of it, as he understands cats are wont to do, and even if she does not - even if Hannibal leaves enough food to last - after they see what he has done to the body people will assume that she has been worrying pieces away from it, and will put her down for the indiscretion.

I'll put it outside, he thinks, but of course it is deadly cold outside.

So instead he bundles the kitten under his coat, and leaves for home.

Hannibal holds the kitten out to Margot.

"A gift," he suggests.

Margot does not take her. "The ark is full, Hannibal. We don't need anymore pets."

He shrugs. "It was worth a try."

Winston's crate has already been set up in the living room, as Hannibal intends to pick him up in the morning, but tonight it is vacant. Hannibal sets the kitten up inside of it with food and water and a pillow, thinking that he will think of something to do with her tomorrow.

The idea that he has incurred a responsibility - one that will not, after all, constitute an unpleasant burden - has only begun to poke at the edge of his mind.

Margot watches him work. Hannibal feels the concern in her gaze but refuses to acknowledge it. He does not wish to answer questions about what happened or how he feels about it - not now, at least, before he has had time to think his way through everything within the privacy of his own head, and then to take the thing out and explore it with Will.

She seems to understand this intuitively, a thing for Hannibal is intensely grateful. And too, he allows, it may be simply that she doesn’t want to know.

In any case, Margot makes her goodnights a few minutes later, and retires into her bedroom. When she has gone, Hannibal takes the package from his coat pocket and secrets it in the back of the freezer.

Chapter End Notes

Jove gets credit for the introduction of this small, and as of yet unnamed, kitten into Will and Hannibal's growing family. <333

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The afternoon after Margot leaves for home, Will follows the scent of cooking meat to the kitchen.

Hannibal's back is to him. He stands in front of the stove, very still, watching the pot boil.

Will is considerably better than he has been, but he has found that he has very little energy, and that he gets dizzy easily. He leans against the doorframe for support, his bandaged hands dangling down at a careful distance from his body. He is thinking, *He is doing this because he cares about me. He wants to make me something that he knows I will like - comfort food to make me feel better - while at the same time reassuring me that I am accepted.*

The idea makes Will desperately uncomfortable even as it moves him near to tears.

"Hannibal," he says, and hears the quaver in his voice, "you didn't have to do this for me. I know you don't -"

Hannibal turns and looks at him. He cuts Will off. "I haven't made it for you."

The relief that brings stuns Will into silence.

Hannibal turns away again, and Will watches him, watching the pot.

After a while Will says, "Could I have some anyway?"

Hannibal moves. He takes a pair of bowls from the cupboard and two soup spoons from the drawer. Will sits down at the table and watches as Hannibal ladles the soup out.

What Hannibal puts in front of him is not especially appealing. Small cubes of a lean and stringy meat float in a thin broth, unadorned and unseasoned.

Hannibal sits down in front of his own bowl as Will brings the spoon to his lips. "It's not very good," he says.

"This is the way it was," Hannibal tells him. "What they made of her."

Will already understood that much. "Listen," he says. "Listen, this isn't healthy. You're retraumatizing yourself, you shouldn't -" But the spoon is already in Hannibal's hand, and he pays Will no mind.

Will has never seen Hannibal tremble before, but there is a tremor in his hand as he lifts the spoon toward his mouth. It jitters out of his grasp and clatters to the floor.

Hannibal looks down at it, clearly shocked.

"Hannibal, please -" Will starts, but Hannibal lifts the bowl to his lips and drinks from it. He drains the dredges, every last drop, and then he sits the empty bowl down on the table. It makes a small sound.

“There,” he says, and his upper lip curls in a snarl as his tongue darts out to lick the broth from his upper lip. “He’s been paid back in kind.”

“Even Steven,” Will says, uneasily.

Now that it is done with, Hannibal seems quite untroubled. He turns his focus on Will, studying him. “The enemy inside you is whispering in your ear,” Hannibal observes.

“Yes.”

“What is he saying?”

“‘You should have stopped him. If you loved him, you’d have made him stop, but you let him hurt himself because you want it. You want him to be like you because you are selfish.’”

“I am like you.”

“No, Hannibal. No.”

“I’ve always been like you, Will. I am not meat; I’m another predator, and you and I are just alike.”

Will sits quietly, sipping at the soup. He know that there is no point in arguing - that Hannibal is right.
Winston and the cat run into the kitchen, chasing each other, and Will smiles at them despite his disquiet. He hadn’t liked the idea of having a cat, much less one that lived indoors - when he’d been a boy they’d only kept barn cats - but over the last week Mouser has grown on Will, and he has to admit that Winston enjoys her companionship. She is a fixture in their lives now, regardless of her origins.

“I know that you’re right,” Will says, after a time. “Or at least, close enough to right as to make no difference. But it’s hard for me to accept something that I want so badly. It feels like I must be tricking you somehow, or maybe myself. Does that make sense to you?” Hannibal’s level gaze is answer enough. “No, of course. You don’t doubt yourself.

“You're stronger than me, you know, in every way that counts.” Will is glad that his voice doesn’t sound as bitter as he’d feared it might.

They are quiet for a while longer. “Is there any of the meat left?” Will asks eventually.

“Perhaps two pounds, in the freezer,” Hannibal allows.

“I could make something from it - something that tastes good, even if it is tough old meat.

“Or I could show you how, at least,” he allows, gesturing with his bandaged and uncooperative hands. “Would you like that?”

Hannibal nods.

Chapter End Notes

There will be another story (at least one more) in this series, but as I am swamped with school work I probably won't be able to update again for a week at least.

Works inspired by this one

Pour some sugar on me by JonathansNightFlight

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